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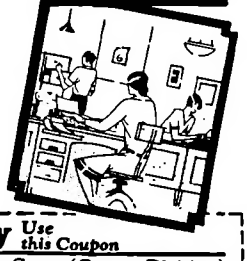

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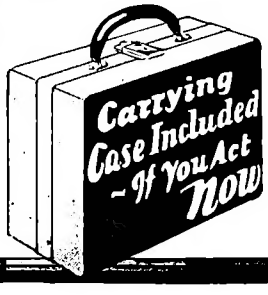

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Love's Branding Iron

Bargained for like a head of cattle—marked as belonging to a loathed stranger—her happiness was forfeit for her father's life!

He sank into a daze against her shoulder

By Ethel LeCompte

Author of "Winter in Her Heart," etc.

CHAPTER I

IT was at sunset on her nineteenth birthday that the blow fell, dispelling the ecstasy of her "glory hour," shattering her hopes, and striking at the very roots of her life.

Averil's earliest recollections were her glory hours, when she sat, each clear evening, on the porch of the ranch house with her mother, drinking in the beauty of the Montana sunset, than which there is none more magnificent in all the world. During these few minutes snatched from their busy day, mother and daughter were caught up to the high realms of delight by the

heavenly splendor and its earthly reflection. Metamorphosed by the radiant light, the familiar panorama of mountains, prairies, lakes, and streams was transformed into a vision of indescribable glory.

As the winsome child grew in stature and beauty, the mother's eyes frequently turned from the sunset to the vivid face beside her. Even while she rejoiced in the girl's loveliness, Sally Beyle was fearful as to what fate held in store for Averil—Averil with the mass of curls, red-gold in the sun, yellow-gold in the shade; with the exotic amber eyes that danced behind golden fringes, while a dimple came and went in her rounded, sun-tanned cheek; Averil, who, for all her slenderness and her boyish riding clothes, was alluringly feminine, and who possessed an appeal that not only caught the roving masculine eye but held it.

For eighteen years Sally watched over and guarded both her beautiful daughter and her handsome, shiftless husband, and then she left Averil to keep her daily rendezvous at the sunset hour alone. In life, she had defended her husband.

"Terry's not bad—just weak," she would say.

Dying, she whispered to Averil:

"Daughter, take care of your father, as I have tried to do. Promise!"

Averil promised. For a year she did her utmost to keep the promise, but Terry Beyle went from bad to worse, from worthlessness to surreptitious lawlessness. The ranch had never paid and was heavily mortgaged. It was the wheat crop that had kept the Beyles from actual poverty, but the spring that followed his wife's death saw Terry putting in only a few acres of wheat. He sold the flivver, the few cows, and all but two of the horses.

During May and June the only source of revenue was Averil's chickens. In exchange for their eggs, she received from an old chap called Larry some necessary supplies, a little cash, and much gossip when he called every other day. In July, Terry Beyle began to contribute a few dollars each week, telling Averil that he had had luck at poker.

On the morning when Averil came upon him shaping a branding iron on the anvil, she experienced a queer feeling of panic. It never dawned upon her, however, that her father, shiftless as he was, had actually turned rustler: and so when the blow fell that sunset hour in August, it all but killed her.

Lost to the world, watching the glory of the heavens, Averil did not hear the approaching cavalcade until it turned from the highway into the road. Startled, she ran swiftly to the end of the porch. The horsemen halted at the gate, and she recognized her father's yellow mustang. After a brief exchange of words, her father and another man rode on to the tie bar.

MEANWHILE Averil blinked and pressed her hands to her eyes, vainly endeavoring to clear them of the sun spot. When she looked again, her father and the stranger had dismounted and were walking toward the house. Suddenly Averil understood. With a terrified scream, she dashed down the steps and threw herself on her father's breast. Then she tore wildly at the thong that bound his hands.

"Put that gun away!" she cried to his escort. Then, to her father: "Dad, what does this mean?"

Her father did not answer, but merely stood there, his handsome, weak face white under its tan.

Again she turned to the stranger, a tall, loosely knit man who wore the regulation orange leather chaps, a plaid jacket, and a bright neckerchief. His ten-gallon hat was pulled so far over his eyes that Averil could see only a stubble-covered chin, thin, cruel lips, and a bit of sun-tanned cheek.

Since their meeting, he had been eying her steadily from under his sombrero. Now he drawled:

"Seems from the way you're acting up that you really don't know what it's all about."

"She doesn't," snapped Beyle. "I told you that before."

"You've been telling me plenty during the past few hours," returned the other. Again he addressed Averil, who was leaning against the post at the foot of the steps, half dead with fear. "Who's in the house?" he demanded.

Beyle answered that.

"I told you we lived here quite alone," he said.

"Do you, sister?" asked the stranger.

"Yes, yes—but what's my dad done?"

"No visitors in the house, or a sweetheart handy with a gun?" persisted the man.

"No, oh, no! Tell me—"

"Little early in the evening for the boy friend to get here, eh? Jeest, but you're a beauty! I'd like to see you in female duds instead o' those riding breeches."

As he spoke, he stuck his gun back in its holster.

"Leave me out of this!" cried Averil furiously. "Tell me why my father is bound and disarmed, and who you are!"

"I'm Slim Hedges, who bought the Double S Ranch last spring and hasn't had sense enough to discover his fine neighbors," he told her with a mocking laugh. "As for your precious parent, we caught him brand blotching."

"Dad a rustler? It isn't true! It can't be true!" Even as she cried out, she knew that it was true. The "poker money" told her so, and she had seen him making a brand. "What are you going to do with him?" she demanded, her voice harsh with terror.

"Hang him, of course," answered Hedges brutally.

A scream escaped from Averil's blanched lips. Desperately she strove for calmness and partially achieved it.

"They don't hang men for cattle stealing in these days," she argued. "Besides, it isn't true."

"They do and it is," Hedges told her succinctly; "but, as this is Beyle's first offense, we're taking him in to turn him over to the authorities. He begged so hard to be allowed to say good-by to you that I let him stop on the way."

"Prison!" breathed Averil.

She sank down on the lowest step, her legs refusing to support her any longer. She looked up at her father beseechingly, but he would not meet her eyes. He was guilty!

"Well, get the farewells over," barked Hedges. "We haven't all night to stand here."

"Have mercy, Hedges!" cried Terry Beyle. "This is my first slip, and I swear it 'll be my last. I'm not much, but I'm all the kin my little girl has. Her mother died only a while back. Give me another chance! Don't take me away from my poor child!"

"Your poor child would be a damned sight better off without you. She looks like a capable, upstanding female, well able to take care of her-

self. Besides that, she's pretty enough to get a man to marry her, and by a man I mean one who could give her anything she wants."

AVERIL only half heard him. What could she say, what could she do to make this man release her father?

"Mr. Hedges," she supplicated, "let my dad off for my sake—for the sake of my dead mother. I promised her on her dying bed that I'd take care of him. Please—"

"Can the sob stuff," interjected Hedges.

Pantomiming a violinist, he whistled a few bars of "Hearts and Flowers." Averil sprang to her feet.

"You cad!" she flared. "I'd like to kill you for that!"

"I bet you would," chortled Hedges delightedly. "What a girl! Well, I guess that was pretty crude comedy. Sorry, Miss Beyle. Now kiss your old man and let's be on our way."

"You're not really taking him to prison?" wailed Averil. "I thought you were just scaring him before you turned him loose."

"Do I look like that kind of sap?"

That second saw the birth of realization of her sex in Averil.

"You don't look like a sap at all," she told Hedges softly. "Neither do you look like a brute."

The man's eyes narrowed, and he took a step nearer to her.

"What do I look like, then?" he demanded.

"A—a regular he-man, who might find it in his heart to let off another man who's not so strong."

Hedges drew himself up at the flattery.

"Well, little girl, you're right there; but when it comes to a rustler—"

"Dad's not a rustler. It's just this moonshine and his grief."

Hedges snorted.

"How long have you lived in Montana?" he asked.

"I was born in this house. Never been away except the winters when I went to school in Butte. What's that got to do with—"

"A Montana girl born and bred knows what a decent man thinks of rustlers. The boys out there were for hanging him straight off, but I—well, to tell you the truth, I'd heard about you, Miss Beyle, and how pretty you were, but how you never bothered with men; so I was powerful anxious to see you, thinking that if you were all I'd heard, why, I might get in right with you by letting your old man off."

Averil ignored the frank insinuation. There was a chance that her father might get off! In her relief she caught Hedges's arm, crying:

"Oh, I knew you'd let him off!"

"Sure I will, if"—he took her hand in his—"you'll promise to marry me. I'm mad about you. I'd do anything for you—anything!"

"Marry you!" gasped Averil. "Why—"

"I suppose you've heard tales about me, eh? I admit I've been pretty wild, but it's better to marry a man who's sown his wild oats. Now wait until I get through, please. I'm twenty-four, never been married, I'm easy-going, and oh, baby, how I could love you! I'll build you the swellest ranch-house in the country next spring and buy you a flivver and everything."

Both father and daughter had stood dumfounded, listening to this frank declaration. In Beyle's eyes flickered the light of hope, but Averil's held only terror. She had heard terrible things about the new owner of the Double S

Ranch, and the thought of marrying him horrified her. She was naturally romantic. Her thoughts often turned to the prince who was one day to come to her, and she knew that this was not he. True, Hedges had come to her at sunset, her "glory hour," as she had dreamed that the prince would, but most certainly this was not the prince.

"Well, how about it?" Hedges was asking impatiently.

Beyle answered that.

"My daughter must be left out of this," he said.

Averil's desperate eyes stared at him, standing there with his hands bound, his shoulders drooping, and his grizzled head bowed in despair. Her hands flew up, covering her eyes, shutting him from her sight.

"Mother!" she breathed. "I can't, not even for your sake!"

The sun had sunk behind the mountains, and with its going Averil's ruddy curls had turned pale. So, too, had despair quenched the fire of her anger; but to the man watching her she was even more appealing in her wistful helplessness and grief. He fumbled for his clasp knife, even while he called himself a soft fool.

At the sight of the tears that dropped through her fingers her father groaned.

"Averil," he whispered, "forget me. I'm not worth your thoughts or your grief."

At that she flung herself on him again, weeping wildly.

A quick movement of Hedges's hand, and the prisoner's bonds were cut.

Beyle gasped with the pain of the returning circulation, but he raised his arms and clasped them about his daughter's slender, sob-racked body.

"Never could stand to see a girl cry," muttered Hedges to no one in particular. He rolled a cigarette and lit it, inhaling deeply. "Averil!" he murmured. "Pretty name, Averil!"

HER father's comforting words were having their effect, and the girl's sobs gradually ceased. Presently she raised her head and murmured:

"Thank you, Mr. Hedges."

Hedges waved that aside.

"Listen, Averil," he began. "Forget the things you heard about me. Honest, I'm not so worse. You see for yourself that I'm a big softy. A few tears, and where am I? Now listen to this idea—marry me, and your father goes free. Now wait a moment, girl, wa-a-ait a moment! If you feel that you can't leave him just now, I won't collect you until spring. I may have to go away for a spell this fall, anyway. Family static. Confound families, always butting in and raising the dickens!" he muttered to himself.

"Then you want me to promise to marry you in the spring?"

"No. Marry me to-night, before I go away. I'll give you my word to leave you at the altar, as the old books used to put it. By spring you ought to get used to the idea."

"Please, please, Mr. Hedges, don't ask me to marry you."

"Don't you ever want to get married to any one?"

"Of course I want to be married, but—for love only."

"Then you don't think you could ever learn to love me?"

"I know I couldn't," Averil told him quietly.

"All right!" Hedges snapped out of his softened mood. "Come along, Beyle!"

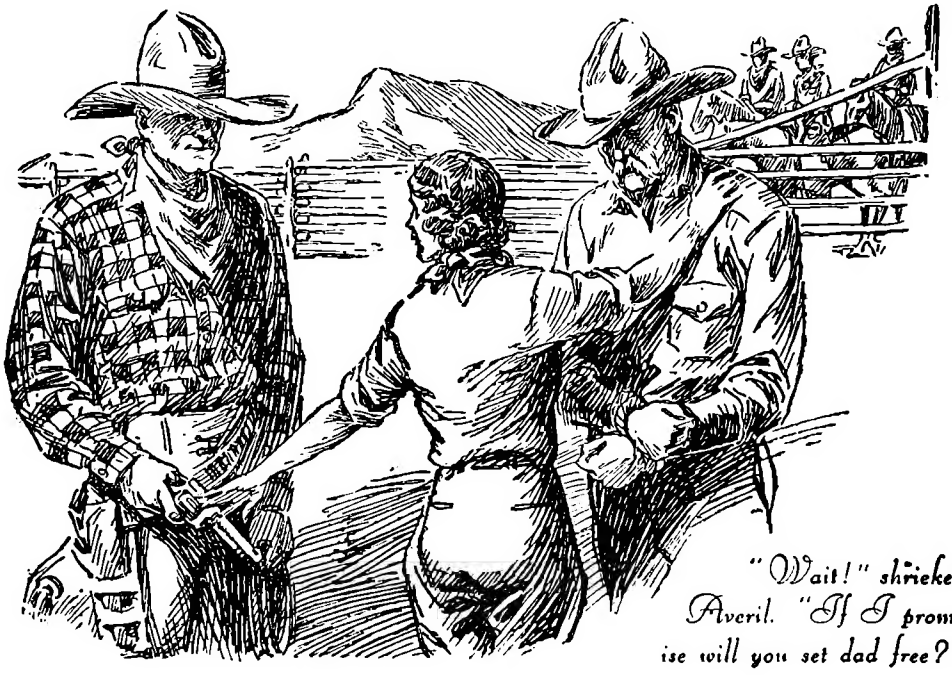
He caught the elder man by the shoulder roughly; but Averil flung herself between them and tore his hand away. As she did so, she caught the smell of whisky on Hedges's breath. A wild thought came to her. Obviously he had been drinking. If she could put him off until he was sober, perhaps he would be more amenable. She would try.

"You're not—" Averil's lips refused to form the word.

"Sure we are, unless you act sensible."

With his hand he urged his prisoner toward the horses.

"Wait!" shrieked Averil. "Wait! You promise that if I marry you tonight you'll let me come back here alone and stay until spring?"



"Wait!" shrieked Averil. "If I promise will you set dad free?"

"Give me until to-morrow," she pleaded. "Leave dad in my—"

"Yeah, and I'll come back tomorrow and find you both gone! You'd lose nothing by clearing out of this dump."

"How far could we get on horseback, if we did go? You have a big car, I know."

"Listen, I'm not arguing. I'm not leaving him. Come along, Beyle. The boys'll think I'm goofy wasting all this time. Too late now to take you to the county seat lockup," he observed significantly.

"That's the ticket," cried Hedges, whirling around and coming back, "but you got to give me your word you won't light out on me."

"I—I'll marry you, then."

"Atta baby! Now we got to figure. I'll have to go give the boys some song and dance as to why I'm letting Beyle off. They're my riders, but I got to explain in a case of rustling. I'll take 'em over to Bill's place and set 'em up. I'll meet you over at that old sky pilot's cabin on the highway at eight sharp, and we'll have him tie us up. Listen, girl—you give me the slip, and I'll

track you down, and your old man'll dance on air sure as I'm here now!"

CHAPTER II

IT was a little before eight when Averil and her father arrived at the cabin of the old preacher, Reverend Styles as he was called by his small congregation. They had talked it over from every angle, and had decided that it was the only way. Terry had promised to quit drinking entirely, and to work hard until he got enough money to buy a secondhand car. Then, early in the spring, or before, if possible, they would drive over into Wyoming and keep on going.

Reverend Styles, though he was used to almost everything after years in Montana, was startled when they told him why they had come, and swore him to secrecy. He called his plump, rosy-cheeked wife into the small, dimly lit parlor to talk it over.

While they talked, eight o'clock came and went, but the bridegroom elect did not. At half past eight Averil felt a gleam of hope. Perhaps he was not coming to claim her, after all. Perhaps he was too drunk. On the other hand, he might be playing with her as a cat plays with a mouse.

Just before nine o'clock, her father whispered:

"Guess he won't come now, daughter. Let's go!" He turned to the minister. "If Hedges comes," he said, "tell him we waited until nine o'clock, please, reverend."

Averil, too nervous to speak, dragged her father to the door. Just as they reached it, it was flung open.

On the threshold swayed the tall figure of Slim Hedges. Without a word he stumbled into the room, then backed up against a wall and stood there, muttering. He was dressed as he had been when Averil last saw him, except that he no longer wore a plaid jacket over his blue flannel shirt. He had, however, been shaved. After one swift glance at his face, Averil did not look up at him again.

"If you will take your hat off—" suggested Reverend Styles.

Averil saw the sombrero drop upon a chair, but still she did not look up. She could see that Hedges was fumbling in his shirt front, and could hear him grumbling to himself.

"If you can't find the ring," said the preacher, "my wife will lend you hers, won't you, my dear?"

"Gladly," she answered, tugging at it until she got it off.

"Now we're ready," murmured Reverend.

Hedges stopped mumbling and fumbling and stood up straight. A few words—the preacher's, low and nervous; Averil's faint, tremulous; Hedges's mere grunts that might mean anything—and they were man and wife.

"Kiss the bride," said the preacher.

Hedges stooped. Averil shut her eyes. His lips brushed her cheek. It was not until they were outside that she realized that, though his breath had been hot, there was no smell of liquor on it.

The night was as dark as the inside of a pocket. Not a star was visible to guide them, and the moon had not risen as yet. Averil and her father quickly mounted and started toward home. Behind them they heard Hedges's horse stumbling along.

As they neared the road that led from the highway into their place, Averil grew nervous. Suppose he disregarded his promise?

To her relief, he kept right on along the highway after they had turned into

their private road. Beyle, with a muttered "Good night" to Averil, took the horses to the barn. At the pump Averil gulped down a dipperful of icy water. Then she sat down on the porch steps to sob her heart out.

Was there ever so joyless a wedding before? A terrified bride, a sullen, silent bridegroom—probably drunk, too, though he had not smelled of liquor. She recalled that her father used to chew some kind of leaves, so that her mother would not know he had been drinking. Pérhaps Hedges had done that, too. Her mind wandered off from the main topic along futile sidetracks until she dozed.

SOMETHING awakened her sharply—a cry, she thought, though she was not sure. It was very still. All the world was sleeping; every one was safe and happy but her. The sky had cleared. A crescent moon hung above the mountains, stars powdered the velvet-black vault.

Averil turned to mount the steps. As she did so, she heard hoof beats on the road. With a cry of alarm, she ran up the steps and across the porch to the door. There she turned to glance back. A riderless horse was at the drinking trough.

For an instant she hesitated; then she dashed down the steps and crossed the yard. Remembering that Hedges's horse was black and unusually tall, she felt sure that the animal at the trough was his. She led it to the tie bar and stood there, listening.

If it had been a cry that awakened her, it was not repeated. She felt, however, that she must find out whether Hedges had been hurt. She started up the road; then she decided to awaken her father and have him search.

In the kitchen she found and lit the kerosene lamp. Through the half open door of her father's room she could hear his snores and see him stretched across his bed.

"Dad!" she called. "Dad!"

When he did not answer, she picked up the lamp and carried it into the bedroom. The smell of liquor, the bottles on the floor—one of them empty—told the story. The lamp almost fell from her hand.

"Oh, dad!" she moaned. "After your promise, too!"

She stumbled out into the kitchen, a line from one of Robert Service's poems flashing through her brain:

> Two big bottles for me,
> To make me forget the thing I am and the man I used to be.

She put the lamp down and turned to look back into the bedroom.

"So you thought you'd sold me down the river, dad! You let me go through with it, though you felt sure Hedges would go back on his word; but you couldn't bear to be in at the show-down!"

Suddenly she remembered why she had come for her father. She would have to go alone and search for the rider of that riderless horse.

She did not have to search far, for he lay just a few yards beyond the barn. He was breathing heavily, but was unconscious. Even in the dim light of the new moon she recognized the man she had just married. She knew the blue shirt, the neckerchief, the slender length of him.

After her first recoil she knelt beside him and peered into his face, but was unable to distinguish the features. She leaned close, to verify the unbelievable fact that he did not smell of liquor. He had not when he kissed her, but her thought had been that he had fortified

himself with whisky, as her father had done, before coming back for her. She decided that he must have been stunned by a fall from his horse.

She got up and hurried to the pump, to return with a dipper of water. She breathing became that of a conscious man. He pulled himself up to a sitting posture by catching at her arms and shoulders, but then he slumped forward until his head lay heavy on her breast.

For a long moment she stared at him scornfully

poured some down his throat and bathed his face with her handkerchief. Unconscious and harmless, he won her pity. If only he were halfway decent, she would do what her mother before her had done—try to make a good man of a weak one.

Then she laughed at her own silliness. This man was not weak, as her father had been; he was bad and vicious.

No matter what he was, she couldn't let him lie there. Her father, the only person within miles, was also helpless. There was no one to help her, but she must get him into the barn, where he would be safe until morning.

The water made him choke. His

"Help me!" he breathed. "Help me!"

"I want to," she told him. "Drink more water."

She moved his head into the curve of her arm and groped for the dipper. He drank weakly, and his eyes closed again.

"Are you better?" Averil asked softly.

"Where am I?" he asked in a vague, hoarse voice.

"You fell from your horse, I think. I found you here on the road. Are you able to get up? There's fresh hay in the barn close by. You can lie on that until I can get help."

She got him to his feet and across to

the barn. There he sank down upon the mound of hay with a gasping moan.

"I'm ill—dizzy," he muttered. "Must get to her. Help me get to Averil to—"

"I am Averil," the girl cut in. "You got to me, all right. Why couldn't you have had this accident before you did?" she added bitterly.

As if he had not heard, he went on:

"Must find the poor kid, but something's wrong. I can't think. There's something I wanted to do. She must get away. Here!"

He fumbled in his shirt and brought out a flattened wad of bills. Averil took them, trying to understand.

"You want Averil to go away?" she asked softly.

"Yes—away—"

But he leaned forward and rested against her.

"I am Averil," she told him. "How glad I shall be to go away!"

"No—you stay with me. I'm ill—confused. Oh, how sweet you are!" He caught her hand and pressed it to his feverish forehead. "How cool!" he whispered.

Averil brushed back his dark, heavy hair, discovering, as she did so, a large mole on his right temple. She peered closer, wishing that it was light enough for her to see his face.

"Oh, if only you had been like this to-day!" she breathed.

"Ill, you mean?" he asked vaguely.

"No! Nice—quiet."

"Am I nice, sweet?" he asked, his voice clearer.

Averil, startled, sat up, pushing him away.

"Don't, sweet—don't push me away. Tell me you like me."

"Well, you are nicer. Being clean-shaven makes you seem different, too," she admitted reluctantly.

He sat up and slapped his hands hard against his face.

"I must get out of this," he muttered. "Get me water, please."

WHEN she came back with the water he seemed to be asleep. She crouched there in the dark, wishing that it was daylight so that she could go for help. Sick with worry over her father and her own intolerable position—married to this man who was not even worthy of the pity and care she was giving him—she began to cry softly.

As if the sound had pierced the fog in his brain, the man stirred and whispered:

"Water!"

When she held the dipper to his lips he drank only a few mouthfuls and then nestled against her.

"Dream girl!" he said softly. "I knew you wouldn't go away from me. How warm and sweet and soft you are! How kind! You've made me well again."

His arms were about her, and she could feel his breath hot against her neck.

"My little love," he went on, "don't try to get away. If you only knew how I've wanted you! I love you so! Give me your lips, sweet!"

His mouth was upon hers, dragging kisses from it—kisses that robbed her of all power to try to fend them off, all wish to do so.

"Don't tremble so, little love. Kiss me! Say you love me and will never leave me!"

One hand, cupped under the back of her head, held her face pressed close to his; the other moved caressingly over her arms and shoulders, and then smoothed her curls.

"Hair like silk," he breathed. "Tell

me what color your curls are, sweet. Ah, now I remember—pale gold, and your face was as white as a lily; but your eyes—I can't remember your eyes. Why is it so dark?" he cried peevishly. "If only my fingers had eyes at their tips—eyes that could see in the dark! Are your eyes blue, sweet?"

He kissed her closed eyelids; but Averil did not answer. Torn between her desire to get away from the man she knew he was, and her desire to stay with the man he seemed to be here in the darkness, she alternately resisted and yielded. He was strong enough to cope with her struggles. When she ceased to struggle he grew tender and went on whispering soft love words and names.

Sometimes he seemed quite rational, and talked as if he knew what he was saying, and as if she were his sweetheart. Then he lapsed into a daze, muttering that he must help "Averil" to get away. Always he clung to her, and always his voice was hoarse and without tone—not harsh and loud, as it had been that afternoon.

Once, under the magic of his kisses, tender now, and his love words, she whispered back:

"Ah, if only you were my dream lover, the lover who was to come to me at sunset!"

Her lips, moving against his, made him cry:

"You kissed me at last, sweet! Now say you love me. Make us both happy—"

"No, no!" she whimpered, but she kissed him.

"I shall remember that kiss as long as I live," he told her, speaking as if he were fully conscious. Then, in a changed and thickened voice, he said: "Tell me your name."

"Averil," she said clearly. "Averil."

"Averil!" he repeated vaguely. "I must try to remember that, too; but I sent Averil away. I gave her money to buy a car."

Averil's hand went to the money tucked inside her blouse.

"Of course you did," she told him soothingly. "Now lie down, and sleep until daylight comes. Sleep! Sleep!" she repeated over and over, willing him to obey, rocking him as he lay in her arms, as if he were a baby.

His breathing grew more regular, and he sagged against her. Gently she lowered him upon the hay, and got up. One of her feet was asleep, and she felt cramped and stiff. Covering him with a horse blanket, she stole back to the house.

She tried every way to awaken her father. Finally she gave up and went back to the barn, stopping on the way to unhitch the black horse and take it with her. She put it into a stall near its owner, who seemed to be sleeping normally. Utterly spent and exhausted, she made her way to the house once more and fell across her bed.

CHAPTER III

IT was bright daylight when Averil awakened. She lay trying to think why she was fully dressed, and what made her feel so ill and depressed. Wearily she sat up. From her window she could see the barn. As she looked, she saw a horse being led out by a man. The sight brought back all the events of the night.

She sprang to her feet and went to the window. Beyond a slight wavering in his step, Hedges seemed to be all right. He had found his hat, she noticed. It seemed difficult for him to mount his beast, but he finally did it.

Mounted, he seemed uncertain what to do next. He turned and glanced back at the house, and Averil, sick at heart, dropped to the floor out of sight. When she peeped again, he was moving toward the highway, riding slowly.

That morning, as she went about her familiar tasks, Averil would have believed everything that happened between sunset yesterday and sunrise today to be a dream, were it not for that glimpse of Hedges departing and the presence of the roll of bills, which she found to contain a hundred and seventy-two dollars. Her adventure after the wedding was more real than the wedding itself, for of that she had no tangible evidence, not even a wedding ring. Why, she asked herself over and over, had Hedges forced her to marry him, and then given her money to go away? Which was the real man—the drunken bully or the other? Or was it simply that illness had softened him?

While she was puzzling over the matter, she had not been idle. There was always enough to do, even when she got up at dawn, and to-day she must hurry to make up for the lost hour. She could hear her father snoring away, but she made no attempt to arouse him.

Before she had her own breakfast, she put outside a dozen motherless chicks that she kept near the kitchen stove at night and fed and watered them and the other chickens. Then she went to the barn, to care for the two horses, and to turn them loose in the fenced pasture to roll and run. In the barn she stood looking down at the mound of hay upon which she had sat last night with her strange bridegroom. Word by word she went over their odd, patternless talk. At the memory of his hard, terrible kisses, she shuddered. Recalling others more tender, and her own half-yielding attitude, she flushed and hurried out into the bright, clean sunlight,

She brought wood into the kitchen with her, and started a fire in the cooking stove. Then she went for water. Some she left in the big galvanized pail which she set on the stove, some she poured into the kettle to heat for coffee, some she put in a great jug to keep for drinking water. While she snatched a hasty breakfast, she set bread to rise. After washing the dishes and sweeping the kitchen and porch, she plucked and prepared a chicken for frying. There was a full hour's work in the truck garden; then the bread was ready to knead. She put some in pans, added raisins and sugar to the rest, and made it into buns.

She carried the pail of hot water into her own room and emptied it into the galvanized tub. She refilled the pail at the pump, put more wood on the fire, and set the pail on the stove. Then she spent a luxurious half hour over her own toilet.

Bathed, dressed in clean clothes—a muslin shirt and slip and a lavender chambray bungalow apron—she felt a different being from the untidy, weary girl in the old riding breeches and flannel blouse. She brushed her curls until they shone in the sun like red gold.

The bath water emptied, the tub set near her father's door, the fire replenished, she set about making pies. While she sat on the porch, peeling the apples, she tried to rout the thoughts that had been torturing her all morning by thinking of her father, and by trying to remember what her mother had said to him after one of his sprees. She had prepared the things he liked to eat, as she had seen her mother do, to get him to a state of mind that would allow her to talk seriously to him. She didn't

know what to say, however. Never before had he done anything so terrible.

Not only was he a self-confessed rustler, but he had spoiled Averil's whole life. Even if she did get away, she would still be married, not free to marry when the real lover came into her life. Had it not been for her promise to her mother, she would have taken Nell, her mare, and the money, and would have fled before her father awakened. She decided that she would compromise—that is, she would act as her mother had done, but would talk as she wanted to. She would have it out with him, man to man.

The bread, the buns, and the pies had been baked and set on the window sill to cool, and her work was finished, when she heard him stirring in his room. Out to the barn she hurried, and there she stayed pottering about until she thought he had had time to wash and shave.

AS she was nerving herself to go in and face him, she heard him approaching the barn. Slowly he came toward her, his face grim with shame, his shoulders sagging, his hands playing nervously with some straw that he had picked up. For a long moment scornful amber eyes stared into shamed gray ones.

"Averil," said Terry Beyle in a low voice, "I'm not fit to be the father of any one, least of all such a girl as you are."

"You're right about that," answered Averil readily. "You were not fit to be the husband of my mother, either."

"But for me she'd be alive now," cried the unhappy man. "But for me you'd—"

He choked and sat down on an upturned box, his head cupped in his trembling hands. Averil considered him in silence for a while. There was nothing she could do or say that would make him understand how terrible, how heinous, was the thing he had done to her. After all, therefore, it was no use to have that man-to-man talk.

"Well, there's no use fussing or crying over your unfitness at this late day," she philosophized; and there's no sense trying to reform you."

Beyle looked up at that.

"Averil, I swear I'll never drink again. As for the other—my God, I don't know how I ever started that accursed business!"

He was wild-eyed now, hysterical. Averil shrugged.

"I've heard you swear off drinking about four times a year ever since I can remember," she said coldly. "Yesterday you swore so earnestly that I believed you."

"I meant to keep it, too; but I got to thinking, and—"

When he did not go on, Averil said bitterly:

"You felt that you had been a coward to let me suffer for your crime. You didn't trust Hedges, and you didn't want to be conscious—"

Her father threw up a protesting hand.

"Don't!" he begged, his voice almost shrill. "The man gave me his word."

"His word! How much is that worth?"

Beyle blanched at that and started up from his seat.

"Did that low-down cur break his word? Did he—"

"No," interrupted Averil; "but he—"

She checked herself. It was no use to tell him of all that had happened even if it could be told. It couldn't, she realized, for it would make a

strange, rambling story without beginning or end, without rime or reason. Besides, it was her secret, her very own. Not even the man who had shared that hour with her would be able to remember it all. He might have

"Nell and Jupe would be better on the trails."

"We couldn't skulk in the woods and mountains forever. We'd have to come out on the highway and go into towns."

For the first time Averil saw the face of her husband!

flashes, probably thinking that he had dreamed it; but it was her secret, and—part of it was sweet.

"But he what?" her father was prompting.

"Oh, he may decide to break it today, to-morrow, any day," she substituted.

"Then let's get away from here!" cried Terry Beyle. "There's nothing to keep us. We—"

"Nothing to keep us but Hedges's threat to run us to earth if we do try to get away. He has a car—"

"I'll work, save, get a car again. We'll stay here now, but I'll make him keep his promise, and in the spring we'll get away."

Averil went close to her father and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Atta boy, dad!" she applauded. "That's what I wanted you to say!"

He pressed her hand to his cheek and put his other arm around her.

"This time I'll keep my word, daughter. In Wyoming we'll start anew."

"I'll be just as much married in

Wyoming as I am in Montana," Averil pointed out, her voice bitter, her face grim.

"It can be annulled," said her father. "It was no marriage."

Averil freed herself from his embrace and walked to the door. She had no intention of leaving Montana until she had met Slim Hedges face to face, and found out which was the true man, the brute or—the other.

"Come on, dad!" she called over her shoulder. "I've done all the work that's been done on this place to-day. Get some potatoes and peel them while I get dinner. I'm starving!"

As she served the perfectly fried chicken, Averil said:

"You don't deserve this, dad, but I thought a good meal might strengthen your will power and prove to you that I love you, no matter what you have done." She leaned over him and kissed him forgivingly. "You will go straight and work hard?" she asked earnestly.

"I will, honey. I swear it by my love for your mother!"

CHAPTER IV

LIFE went on as usual at the Beyle ranch, except that Terry Beyle worked harder than he had done in a year. There was no sign of Hedges, and no news of him until old Larry came around, three days after the wedding, bringing the provisions that Averil had ordered. Her eggs were all packed in cases, ready for him.

They greeted each other affectionately, for Larry was an old and well liked friend.

"New chicken house is finished," he told Averil. "I'd like to buy a few of your thoroughbreds for breeding."

"I can let you have a couple of dozen pullets, a few broody hens and two good roosters," Averil answered, after thinking it over; "but I want cash for them this time."

Larry laughed.

"I'll give you cash for all I buy, honey; but you got to let me have more'n that. Give you a good price for the whole layout. Save you feed and work, come winter."

"Don't rush me, Larry. I'll think it over. Tell you next time you come around."

"You women never know what you want to do!" grumbled the old man, with a smile that took the sting out of the words.

He lit his corncob pipe and settled back on the porch steps to retail the gossip of which he always had plenty.

Usually Averil was eager for news, for Larry was her only source. To-day, however, she paid little heed to his chatter until the name of Hedges made her sit up sharply. Larry was cursing the ranchman roundly.

"What's he done now?" Averil asked, trying to speak casually while her heart was thumping audibly.

"Oh, the usual, only worse and more of it," snarled Larry. "Been rampaging around the county with his gang. Met him down at Bill's place a spell back, drinking. He was all banged up—been in a fight."

"You sure he was drunk? He might have been sick."

"Sick!" derided old Larry. "Plain drunk, as usual. Add to that a fighting mad temper. He was broadcasting how somebody done him dirt."

A shiver went through his listener; she leaned heavily against the porch railing. The whole disgraceful story would be over all the country, she agonized. To think that she had ever

had a kind feeling for the drunken beast—that she had been in his arms, had let him kiss her! The marrying part she couldn't help, but the other—She writhed and felt hot with shame.

"Who wronged him, Larry, and what did they do?" she asked.

"No one knows. Doubt if he knows himself. Cursing everybody, especially his family and his brother."

"His brother, Larry?" inquired Averil. Then she repeated eagerly: "His brother?"

Larry stared at her.

"What's it to you, Averil?" he demanded. "You're all white and shaky like."

"Nothing," denied Averil. "Nothing at all. I just felt curious."

"Just his talk—I don't believe he has a brother. You sure look upset, girl! Say, I just remembered another thing. He was boasting that he'd get some girl hereabouts and fix her. You—you bean't the girl he mean, be you, child?"

"Course not, silly! There are other girls in the county."

"Not so many of 'em, at that. Can't you trust old Larry?"

"Of course I can," she told him. "Did—did he say his brother had been here, Larry?"

"No—he just kept cursing him for butting in on his affairs. I think he's the black sheep of the family, and they been dogging him to go back east, wherever he comes from. Spill it, girl—what's eating you? Can I help?"

"Hedges *is* after me, Larry," Averil confessed nervously. "I'm afraid I'll have to—to run away."

"Judas priest!" exploded old Larry. "Ain't there no law and order in this here land? Let's go see the sheriff—"

"No, Larry, we mustn't tell any one. Let me think."

"Where's your dad?" Larry asked, not as if he expected any real help from that quarter, but merely for curiosity.

"He's working over in the south field," replied Averil. "He's been working hard for quite a spell," she added defensively.

Larry grunted non-committally and knocked out his pipe.

"Finished your thinking yet?"

"Yes. I want to go and see Hedges. You must drive me over. I want to see him without his seeing me."

"How'll you arrange that?"

"Lend me your sombrero and that slicker in back there. I'll tell you the rest as we go along. Please, Larry dear, please!"

SOME time later a slender slicker-clad figure slipped into the back door of Bill's place, hurried down the passageway—Averil knew the layout only too well, having on several occasions collected her father from there—and into a barely furnished room. The room had another door, which led into the "office," the big room where the bar and gambling tables were.

The small room was deserted, as she had hoped it would be, but she could hear loud voices from the other room. Into this room she peeped through a crack in the door. There were four men leaning on the bar, drinking liquor as if there was no such thing as prohibition. Suddenly one of the men laughed, raised his glass, and threw back his head. For the first time Averil really saw the face of Slim Hedges!

Before she could control it, a little cry burst from her lips.

His chin was covered with stubble again, his eyes were bloodshot and bleared, his face reddish purple. His hair, which was darker than his

beard, waved back from his forehead just as she remembered it had when she had touched it that night. Now, however, it was untidy and straggly.

Hedges poured another drink and shoved it along to his companions.

"Drink to the housewarming, boys!" he cried loudly.

"When's it to be, Slim?" one of them asked.

"Soon's I sober up enough to go get my lil gal. She don't like 'em drunk. Besides, I got to be able to handle her, 'cause she ain't aiming to have me come around until spring." He laughed aloud.

Averil waited to hear no more. Seething with hate and rage, she rushed out of the place.

For some time after she joined Larry she was incapable of coherent thought, but sat beside him silently, her brain misted with fury.

The old man asked no questions as they drove back to the Beyle ranch. Just before they reached their destination, Averil said abruptly:

"I've got to get away, Larry. There is no other way. You can have the chickens and anything else you can use. I've got to have a car and money to buy a camping outfit."

"Reckon we can arrange all that, girl," Larry assured her.

They picked up Beyle and brought him over to the ranch house.

"Larry has a proposition to talk over with us, dad," Averil explained. "Dad, you and I are starting for Wyoming at sun-up to-morrow!"

"Are you mad, Averil?"

"I've been mighty close to madness, dad, but I'm quite sane now. If you won't come with me, I'll go alone. I've just been over to Bill's place. Hedges is there. He didn't see me, of course, but I saw and heard him. He intends to come over here to get me—"

She could get no further. Beyle ripped out an oath.

"I feel like a filthy coward, daughter, to run away, but I know it's the only way."

Larry had taken one load of things away, and had returned with his brother. The latter drove another flivver, which the Beyles were to use in their flight.

"Not knowing that we've bought the flivver, if Hedges telephones ahead, he'll describe us as riding horses," Averil said. "In a car we can pass ourselves off as tourists from the East —say Minnesota. We'd best change our name. Bailey will do. I'll be Agnes, for Averil's too uncommon. You'd best stick to 'daughter,' though.

She had her way. The sun was just rising when they started. Late that evening they stopped at a settlement and bought provisions, and, for Terry, clothes that might belong to a tourist from Minnesota—cloth breeches and high laced boots. Averil bought a dark ulster, new breeches, flannel shirts, and a sombrero.

"Cheer up, dad!" Averil encouraged him, when they were on their way again. "Over the line lie Wyoming, fame, fortune and happiness!"

In her most romantic dreaming, however, Averil never imagined anything half as wonderful as what was to befall her in Wyoming.

Her Love at Stake

A cruel trick of fate made her appear faithless in her lover's eyes. There was one chance—would her courage be equal to the test?

By Edna Ettinger

VIDA ROMNEY stopped drying the dishes in the kitchen the instant she heard the postman's whistle. It was very seldom that the postman stopped at their house and a letter always gave her a thrill.

Letters were such wonderful things. They brought you closer to the people you loved. Sometimes they made you happy. Especially those priceless letters from cousin Alice in the East. And sometimes they made you sad. The last letter did—the one which had told of grandmother's death.

Vida opened the front door and glanced into the rusty letter-box that was nailed to the wall. The tiny green flecks in her gray eyes sparkled when they beheld an odd-shaped lavender envelope. No need to study the handwriting. It would be from Alice. She had already saved a drawerful of those precious lavender letters.

She returned to the kitchen and slit the envelope very carefully. Then she removed the letter and sat down to read it, leisurely and happily.

As she opened it, a small piece of blue paper dropped out and fell to the floor. Vida picked it up. It was a postal money order for five hundred dollars—made out to her!

Waves of heat flushed her pretty face and even made her reddish-brown hair seem redder. Being poor and proud she was especially hostile to gifts

As she settled herself in Larry's arms the man she loved rounded the tree and stood before her!

of money. She didn't mind the expensive presents Alice sent her for her birthday and for Christmas. They were always personal things and she believed that Alice sent them to her because she loved her. But a gift of money—

Vida looked at the money order with a sinking heart. Why had Alice sent it? Did she wish to spoil their beautiful friendship? Although Vida was sure that Alice's action was without malice, it brought home to her the difference in their stations.

VIDA'S mother and Alice's mother were sisters. Vida's mother had married the man she loved, contrary to her parents' wishes. Then, as now, he was unsuccessful in business, and they were very poor. Alice's mother, on the other hand, had married a rich man's son with the full approval of her parents. And they were very rich now.

Vida's mother still believed in her husband. Time and again she had refused help from Alice's mother. She was contented with the little she had. It tasted sweet to her because it came from the man she loved.

Vida could hear her mother now running the carpet sweeper over the old worn rug in the dining room. She knew full well that if she showed her mother the money order, she would be told to send it right back, no matter how badly they needed it. Vida decided not to mention it to her.

Alice's letter was still in her hand unread. She usually looked forward with a great deal of joy to reading Alice's letters. But this one had lost all interest.

She wondered—should she send the letter back without reading it?

Then, as a matter of curiosity, she decided to read it. What possible excuse could Alice give for sending the money?

Slowly she read:

VIDA, DARLING:

At last, grandma's will has been found. And it is very, very unfair. You and I were her only grandchildren. In all fairness she should have divided the estate between us. But she didn't. She could never forgive your mother. And so you were not mentioned in the will. She left everything to me.

I'm very sorry, Vida. If I thought you would accept it, I would be happy to give you half of the estate. That's that.

Now I have something else. A brilliant idea came to me, and I'm praying that you'll think as well of it as I do.

I want you to pay me a visit. I want you to come here for a few months. We'd have such jolly good times together. There's golf and tennis and parties. I know you'd enjoy it. I've bragged so much about you to my friends that I've got to show you to them. Five of the men claim to be in love with you already from the description I've given them. No fooling!

And as for little me, I'm the happiest girl in the world. I'm in love, and this time it's for good. His name is Kenneth Appleton. And he's a darling.

Vida, dearest, if you refuse me, I threaten to come out there, grab you by the hair, and drag you home with me. But I would feel much happier if I knew you were coming because you wanted to come, because you liked your little cousin a little bit.

I think it would be a good idea for you to stop off in Chicago to do your shopping. But please don't take too long. Be sure and send me a wire. I'll be at the station to meet you. Honest, I won't sleep nights until I hear that you're coming.

Oceans and oceans of love from

ALICE.

P.S. If I were sick, and you didn't have the fare, you'd borrow it to come to see me, wouldn't you? Then why not borrow this money order to come and see me when I'm well and happy. I wish I were as sure of everything as I am that you'll pay it back to me some day. If you really love me, you'll come. It means so much to me.

For a moment or two after reading the letter, Vida held it in her lap and stared at it. She was sorry that even for a fraction of a second she had permitted herself to think unworthy thoughts of Alice.

She knew her cousin—they had been playmates when they both lived in the East—and she knew that Alice had a genuine affection for her, as she had for Alice.

VIDA permitted herself to daydream. It is so easy when one is still in the teens. And when one's heart, despite humble surroundings, is filled with glorious dreams of romance.

She pictured herself at Preston-on-the-Atlantic, Alice's father's estate, which stood like a great big castle overlooking the sea. She pictured herself in the big ballroom, the center of an admiring group of men. She pictured herself on the links in smart golf togs. And on the tennis court in a clever sport suit.

It was like going from darkness to sunlight. From poverty to riches.

Her heart cried out that she must go. Even though she would inevitably return to this dull, monotonous existence,

she would at least have tasted the sweets of life for a few months. It would be something to look back upon.

Her heart was young and the temptation was too great. She readily convinced herself that the five hundred dollars was a loan—a debt of honor which she would some day pay back. It was not a gift from Alice. It was not charity.

The whole world was run on credit. People borrowed to buy radios or automobiles. Why shouldn't she borrow for a chance at life?

Her mother, a sweet-faced woman, aged before her time, entered the kitchen.

"A letter from Alice?" she asked, recognizing the stationery.

Vida shook herself from her dreams. "Yes, mother. Please read it."

Vida watched her face as she read it. But her mother never betrayed her feelings by her expression. She read it with sealed lips. When she finished Vida showed her the money order.

Her mother walked over to the kitchen window and gazed out on the back yard where hung a long line of clothes she had recently washed. In the distance she could see the factories with the black smoke curling out of the smoke stacks. The smoke which made the town so dismal. There was sadness on her face, but it quickly changed to gladness.

She turned around and walked back to Vida. She took her daughter's chin in her hand, raised her head and looked into her eyes.

"Do you want to go, dear?" she asked.

"Not if you don't want me to," Vida answered truthfully.

"Then you shall go."

"You won't be lonesome while I'm away?" Vida asked.

"No, I'll be happy knowing that you are happy." There was a sadness in her mother's voice which she could not hide. "I've always wanted to get you away from here. The factories. The smoke. The dirt. There must be something better in store for you than this. I've been praying for it all my life.

"I've tried time and again to save money to send you away. To send you to some place where you belong. But always some illness of father's took the money.

"I'm afraid to wait longer. You must go now. We must accept Alice's offer. We'll borrow the money. And I hope that some day we will be able to return it. You've been splendid, Vida. I've never heard you utter a single word of complaint. You deserve the holiday."

Her mother hurried out of the room. Vida knew that she didn't want to be seen crying.

TEN minutes later Vida handed a telegram across the counter in the telegraph office, telling Alice that she would come. She felt that she was embarking on the greatest adventure of her life.

She stopped at the post-office and cashed the money order. She was afraid to trust it to her bag. She had never had so much money before. She folded it, clenched her fist over it, and walked home that way.

Her father felt the same as her mother did. He regretted that it was not he who was sending her East, but her happiness meant more to him than his pride. He was glad for her sake.

"You'll come with me to Chicago," Vida said to her mother. "It's only forty miles. And you'll be such a help to me in choosing the right kind of clothes."

The very next day they went. They shopped on State Street and on Michigan Boulevard. Each purchase was a thrill for Vida.

They didn't expect to do all the buying in one day so they registered at a hotel. All packages were sent to the hotel. There they were opened and packed in a new, shiny wardrobe trunk that bore Vida's initials.

Vida wore a tricky velvet ensemble in black and eggshell, the day she left for the East. Both her parents were at the station to bid her good-by. Her father gave her a little corsage of flowers and it made her eyes fill.

Dear dad! He tried so hard, but he couldn't make any headway in the battle of life.

"You look exquisite, Vida," he said. "You look as your mother did when she was a girl. And she was a very beautiful girl. Good-by, dear. I hope your dreams come true."

Then her mother took her in her arms and kissed her.

"See here," her mother chided her. "Don't you dare cry. You're going away for a holiday. You're going to have a glorious vacation— That's it. Smile. Show me that you're happy. I am."

The train pulled out of the station and the dismal factory town was left far behind.

Vida settled herself in the Pullman. How clean and fresh everything was. It felt so luxurious to sit back and watch the landscape drift by.

She picked up one of the magazines she had bought for the trip. She tried to read, but she couldn't concentrate. This was too big an adventure to be taken so calmly. To the other passengers it probably meant nothing. But to her, it was the fulfillment of the dream of her young life. It seemed to her that her heart was beating just as fast as the train was going.

What was in store for her in the East. Oh, she could think of a thousand wonderful things. But would they happen? Those men Alice mentioned in her letter—were they nice men? Would they think her as pretty as Alice had described her? Would she fall in love with one of them?

Vida did not sleep soundly that night. Besides the motion of the train which kept her awake, there was the excitement in her heart. Still, when she glanced at herself in the mirror of the washroom in the morning, there were no signs of fatigue on her face.

She was among the first to get off the train at Preston, her overnight bag in her hand. She looked all around the station, but there was no sign of Alice. Was it possible that her cousin had not received her wire?

Vida dropped her bag on the floor. She would wait. Alice must have been delayed.

SUDDENLY, from behind her Vida felt two hands placed over her eyes, shutting out the light. Then she felt the touch of strong, firm lips, as they kissed her soundly.

There was something in that kiss that reached her heart. Instinctively she knew that it wasn't Alice. Alice's lips would have been softer, and there would have been a breath of perfume with them.

But these lips were virile. They seemed to demand response. They affected her more than she could ever be affected by a kiss from Alice. And there was a faint breath of tobacco with the kiss.

Just as suddenly as they had been placed there, so were the hands removed from her eyes.

Vida looked up into the handsome face of a tall young man with eyes of the deepest blue she had ever seen. His sandy colored hair was disarranged and looked as if the wind had blown through it. He wore knickers and a white collarless shirt that was open at the throat.

Vida stared at him in amazement. She had never seen him before. Who was he to kiss her that way?

The young man's mouth opened the slightest bit and he uttered a sound like the intake of breath. He stared at Vida in amazement too.

"I'm very sorry," he apologized. "I should have made certain before I did that. You see, I mistook you for my sister. I expected her on that train. I can't tell you how sorry I am."

Vida wanted to say something, but in the presence of this young man with the eyes that bored into hers she was speechless.

"I hope you believe me," he added. "Really, it's not one of my hobbies to treat strangers that way! But if you saw my sister you'd understand how easy it was for me to make the mistake. You're both of the same height and of the same build and you have the same walk and manner of standing. You had your back to me and I watched you. You walk from your hips instead of your knees, just as she does. And you put your left foot behind your right when you stand, just as she does. I could have sworn you were my sister. So I didn't bother making sure. I just sneaked up behind you. I'm very sorry."

Vida finally found her tongue. The kiss and the young man had left her breathless.

"Oh, it's perfectly all right," she assured him.

"Thanks," he smiled at her.

He turned his back and walked away. Vida looked after him with a wistful look in her eyes. He was so very handsome and so manly.

"You little fool," she scolded herself inwardly, "why didn't you talk to him? Why did you stand there as if you were tongue-tied? Why didn't you tell him that you would be glad to see his sister? That would have been an opening for conversation. Now he's gone and you may never see him again. You little fool, you'll never get anywhere by being shy and backward. Alice would have capitalized an adventure like this."

But Vida knew there was no sense in arguing with herself. She had done it time and again. It was her nature to be shy and reserved. And even though she had set out to be different many times, at the critical moment she always failed.

The young man was passing through one of the doors of the station now.

"I wonder who he is?" Vida thought, as she caught a last glimpse of him.

ALICE came rushing over. She threw her arms around Vida and kissed her several times.

Vida had always admired her cousin because she had the very traits that Vida herself lacked. The dark-haired and dark-eyed Alice was impulsive and spirited. She took the reins wherever she went. She mastered every situation. Life was a joyous thing for her. She went through it without a serious thought.

"Oh, I'm so glad you came," Alice said enthusiastically. "But I'm afraid you won't be very popular with the girls."

"Why not?" Vida asked anxiously.

"Because you're stealing the man they've all set their caps for."

"I don't understand you, Alice."

"Be yourself, Vida," Alice shook a finger at her playfully. "Don't act so innocent. I saw you talking to him. In fact I didn't want to crash in until you finished. If you ask me, for a small town girl you're a rather fast worker!"

"Oh!" Vida understood. "You're wrong, Alice. I don't know him at all. He mistook me for his sister. He crept up behind me, put his hands over my eyes and kissed me."

"What!" Alice exclaimed. "Owen Dunbar kissed you? Well, Vida, you deserve to be congratulated. You're the first girl he's kissed. And heaven knows, plenty of lips have been offered to him. So he mistook you for his sister and kissed you? Isn't that priceless? Just let me tell that to the other girls!"

"No, no." Vida cried in panic. "Please don't. He'll think that I've been going around telling everyone about it."

She was sorry that she had told Alice. She did it unthinkingly. She wasn't the type who spread gossip that might offend. She should have kept it to herself and treasured it as a thrilling adventure.

"But it's such a good joke on him." Alice insisted. "I can just picture his ears turning red whenever it is mentioned."

"Please," Vida pleaded. "You've got to promise me, Alice, not to tell it to a soul. Or else," she added, desperately, "I won't go home with you."

He had been so apologetic. He had begged her forgiveness so earnestly. Vida would do anything in the world rather than hurt him. His deep blue eyes were still before her. She felt that it would require no effort on her part to like him. And if she was going to meet him formally, she didn't want him to think ill of her.

"Well," Alice shrugged her shoulders, "if you feel that way, I'll have to promise. I'll never mention it, Vida."

"You're a darling," Vida took her arm. "Let's go."

"It seems to me," Alice refused to get off the subject, "that besides making an impression on your lips, he made an impression on your heart."

Vida was old fashioned enough to blush. "Come," she said to hide her embarrassment, "I'm dying to see your mother and father."

Alice led the way to a little roadster, shiny with nickel, and Vida sat down beside her. In a moment they were off.

"I wouldn't advise you to waste much time thinking of Owen," Alice told her. "I don't think the girl is alive who could interest him. He lives all alone in a little cabin on Frederick's Island. It's about four miles out in the ocean. He comes here every summer. In the winter he lives back in New York."

Vida listened intently. She was interested and was glad to hear about him.

"He's only twenty-eight," Alice continued. "And he has lots of money. Dad knows him in a business way—he draws plans for bridges. Once Dad got him to come here to a party. He was a frost. He wouldn't dance and he wouldn't take a walk in the garden. And the girls were just crazy about him.

"He likes to be by himself in his cabin reading books. Or else he's in his rowboat fishing. No girl has ever been in that boat. That's why we call it 'No-Girl's-Land.' That's about all I know of him. And now you'd better forget him."

Vida didn't think she could ever forget those deep blue eyes.

PRESTON - ON - THE - ATLANTIC was a gorgeous estate. Vida had tried to picture it from Alice's letters, but she had never been able to conceive anything half so beautiful as the reality. Good taste and an abundance of money had made it one of the show places on the coast.

It had a private beach and a private pier for the Sutton yacht. A motor boat, a few rowboats and canoes were also tied to the pier.

Vida had to catch her breath when Alice took her into a gold and rose boudoir. It reminded her of a magazine in which she had seen pictures of the boudoirs of famous screen stars. But none of them compared to this in luxury.

Vida gasped as Alice tossed her hat and coat carelessly on the beautiful gold and rose brocaded covering on the bed. The thing was so pretty that it actually hurt Vida to see it misused. She took the coat and hat from the bed and placed it on a chair.

"You'll get over that," Alice remarked.

But Vida didn't think so. She was accustomed to a small room, a brass bed, an old ivory dresser and a single chair. If she had a room like this she would treasure it.

"Of course," Alice said, "there are lots of rooms in the house and if you like you can have one for yourself. But I wish you would stay here with me, Vida. I think we'd have lots of fun together."

Vida's eyes swept the room. Why, she'd feel like a princess if she stayed here.

Later, when Vida's trunk arrived, Alice helped her unpack. Her admiration for Vida's new clothes was genuine. She honestly liked them.

"Now don't you dare be bashful," Alice said. "If there is anything of mine that you like, help yourself and no questions asked. Anything except Kenneth. He belongs to me. And I'm not sharing him with anyone."

"I'll remember that," Vida promised.

Alice took a gown from the rack in Vida's trunk. "You must wear this to-night," she said. It was a beautiful evening gown in sunburn satin with a cluster of lavender nasturtiums at the hipline. "You'll look adorable in it."

"Why to-night?" Vida asked. "I was thinking of saving it for a special occasion."

"But to-night is a special occasion," Alice informed her. "I'm giving a party in your honor. It's your début. And you're going to meet all my friends."

Vida put her arms around Alice and kissed her. "I can't tell you how happy you're making me. You're a darling."

"Tut, tut," Alice made little of it. "Don't get sentimental. And don't accept the first proposal you get to-night. I have a hunch that you'll break a few hearts, you pretty thing, you."

IT was a wonderful party. Vida was enchanted. The girls were so pretty. The men were so handsome. And the music was divine.

Vita's desire to like everyone and have everyone like her gave her an added charm. She danced so much she felt sure that she was wearing out the soles of her new satin slippers. However, she felt a little pang of regret that her mother wasn't there to see her. Her mother would have been very happy to see how whole-heartedly she had been accepted by Alice's friends.

She met Kenneth Appleton, Alice's sweetheart, and thought him a splendid

fellow. He was a young attorney, rather serious. Alice needed a man of his character to steady her. She was a bit frisky.

The party was perfect. And yet, it would have been more perfect, Vida thought, if Owen had been there. All evening she had been looking for him. Hoping that he would suddenly appear before her. But it was ridiculous to expect it. Alice considered him a frost and naturally had not invited him.

Vida tried to understand herself. She had met Owen but once, under strange circumstances. In no way did he show any desire to become acquainted with her. He could if he had wanted to. But he left her abruptly. And yet, she would rather have seen him at the party than any of the other men.

When she danced she wished that Owen were her partner. When she took a stroll in the garden with a young man who told her how pretty she was, she wished that Owen were saying those words. She wondered—could it possibly be love at first sight?

If it were, she couldn't help but sigh; it would probably end as all other things had ended in her life—in disappointment. She had known so much trouble, it was hard to be optimistic.

In their silk pajamas Vida and Alice sat in their boudoir recollecting the little incidents that had happened at the party.

"It went off beautifully," Alice said, "but I think you were a little disappointed. I noticed you watched the door quite a lot. Did you expect Owen to come in?"

Vida tried to control her expression. She wished Alice wouldn't talk of him.

"I guess you did," Alice didn't wait for the answer. "I'm sorry, but I made up the list before you came. And I never thought of including him. He would have probably refused the invitation anyhow."

Alice lit another cigarette and blew the smoke to the ceiling thoughtfully.

"I wonder," she mused, half to herself. "He might like you at that. You're sweet, charming and a little old fashioned. I don't mean any offense by that, Vida. I love you just as you are. But you are a little different from the girls of my set." She paused for a moment as if a thought were forming itself in her brain. "Perhaps," she said, almost in a whisper. Then she turned to Vida. "Come, dear, let's get to bed. We have a big day before us tomorrow."

AT Alice's suggestion the next day Vida wore the little tweed sport suit which she had bought, together with the smart white sweater that had an orange V neck.

"We're going out in the motor boat," Alice said. "And I'm going to teach you how to run it. You've got to be a sailor if you stay at Preston. You'll find it a lot of fun. Do you swim?"

"Yes. That's about the only fun I did have at home."

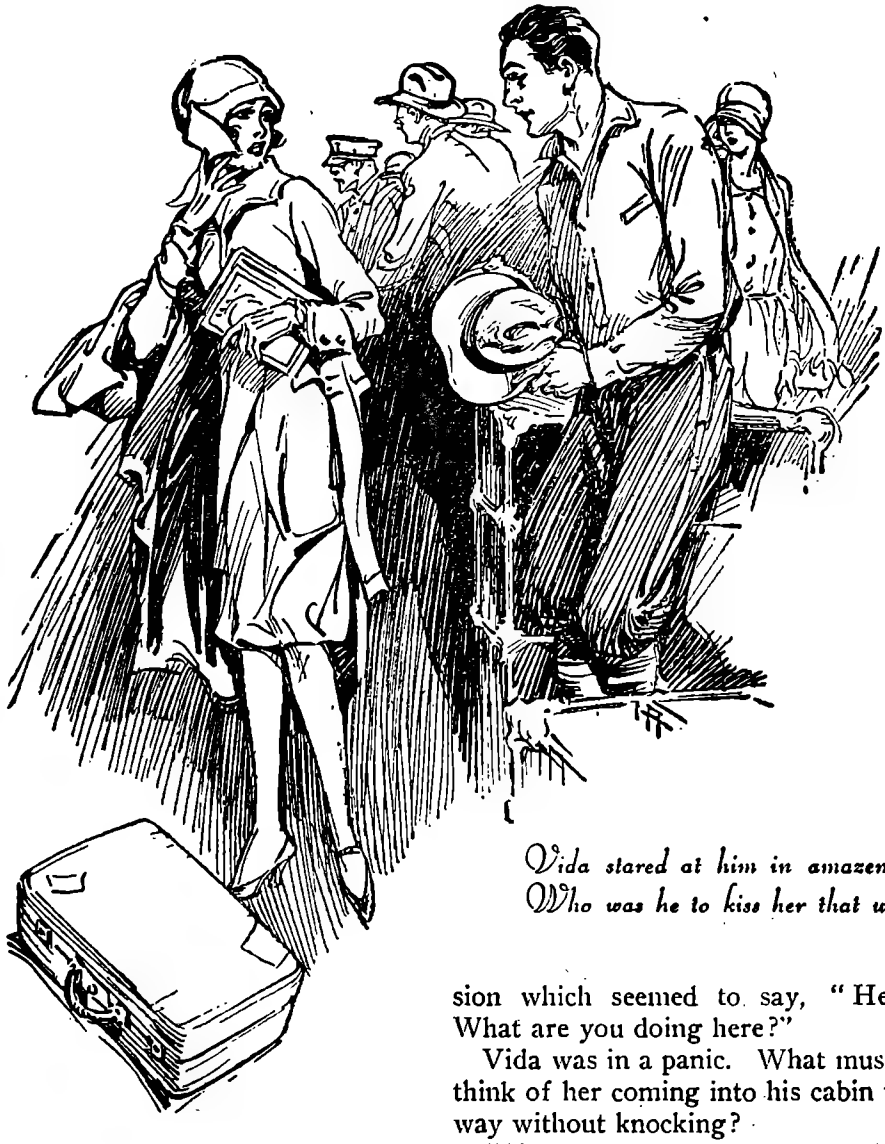
They cruised about for an hour or two, then headed for the islands. There were several of them, four and five miles off shore. Alice steered the boat toward the smallest of the group. As they came closer, Vida noticed that there was a little cabin among the trees.

"That's the grocer," Alice explained. "He supplies the people on the islands with provisions. He sells wonderful candy, too. Would you mind going over and buying a box? I'll wait in the boat for you."

"Of course I'll go," Vida answered.

"He keeps the door shut," Alice said. "But don't bother knocking. Just walk in."

Vida hopped out on the dry sand and walked up to the cabin. As Alice had told her, the door was shut. So she took hold of the knob, opened the door and walked boldly in.



Vida stared at him in amazement. Who was he to kiss her that way?

"Oh!" she uttered an exclamation of surprise as she stopped dead in her tracks.

This was no grocer's shop. It was the living room of a cabin. A man was sitting in a big arm chair, smoking a pipe and reading a book. And the man was Owen Dunbar!

He dropped his book as he recognized her. On his face was an expression which seemed to say, "Hello! What are you doing here?"

Vida was in a panic. What must he think of her coming into his cabin that way without knocking?

"I'm s-s-sorry," she stammered. "I guess I must have got into the wrong cabin. I meant to go to the grocer's to buy a box of candy."

"Grocer's?" he repeated. "There's

no grocer on this island. Mine is the only cabin here."

"But Alice told me—" she stopped abruptly. It suddenly dawned upon her that Alice had deliberately tricked her into going to his cabin so they would meet again. That was why she told her not to knock, but to walk right in.

Vida turned crimson at the thought. Alice might have conceived the plan with every good intention, but it was putting her in a very embarrassing predicament. What could he possibly think of a girl who sought him out that way?

Her look of mortification caused him to rise from his chair.

"Are you referring, perhaps, to Alice Sutton?" he asked.

"Yes," Vida answered. He didn't look so stern now. "She's my cousin. We came up to the island in the motor boat."

"So she told you this was the grocer's?" he smiled, and Vida thought he had lovely teeth. "That's just like Alice. You can never tell what she'll do next."

"I'm glad you understand," Vida said. "I'm sorry to intrude."

She turned to go and he called after her. "Please don't leave."

Her heart beat rapidly as she faced him again.

"You were very kind to accept my apology yesterday," he reminded her and caused the blood to mount to her face, "and I'm very much indebted to you. Won't you stay a while? That would be turning the joke on Alice. Let her fret in the motor boat. She thinks I'm an ogre and must be expecting you to run out of the cabin any moment."

Vida looked into his eyes and felt that he was really welcoming her. So she sat down in a straight-backed chair. He resumed his seat.

From the little table near his chair, he picked up a package of cigarettes. "Smoke?" he offered them to her.

"Thank you," Vida said. "I don't know how."

He looked at her in surprise. Then put the cigarettes back.

"May I smoke?" he asked.

"I wish you would."

"Thanks. By the way, my sister came on a later train. She just stopped off for an hour to see me. Perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned the incident to her, but I did. And she was rather anxious to see you. But of course I didn't know who you were. And I don't know now, either, unless you'll be kind enough to tell me."

THERE was a peculiar air of peace and comfort in the cabin. Sitting only a few feet away from him, her eyes fixed on his face, Vida felt as if she had known him a long time. Somehow or other, in the few words that he had said he had removed all strangeness, all embarrassment, all consciousness of the fact that they were still strangers. She felt that it was quite natural for her to be sitting in his cabin talking to him.

His eyes were gentle and steady, the eyes of one who could be a true friend.

"I'm only a poor girl," she said frankly, who came to live in the land of make-believe for a few months. Then I'll have to go back home with memories."

It never occurred to her to pretend to be anything but what she really was.

"And do you like the land of make-believe?" he asked.

"Well, it's so different from what I've been accustomed to that it overwhelms me. It's like a glorious dream."

"But won't it be tragic going back to the old surroundings?" he asked.

"No," she smiled bravely. "I won't allow it to be. My mother has always preached contentment to me. Strive for something better, but always be contented with what you have."

He looked at her with a serio-comic expression on his face.

"Are you laughing at me?" she asked, hurt.

He rose from his chair and came to her. His face was serious. "I am not," he said firmly. "I'm just trying to place you. You're different from all the other girls I have ever met. There is a quaint old-fashioned streak in you and I admire it immensely. You make me think of my mother. What is your name?"

"Vida Romney."

"And I'm Owen Dunbar." He extended his hand to her. "I hope we'll be friends."

They heard the put-put-put of a motor boat and went to the window. Alice was heading for the mainland! She turned and waved a handkerchief to them.

As one their heads turned from the window and their eyes met. She looked at him bravely, but lowered her lashes under his searching gaze.

"I'll have to thank Alice for that," he said. "Now you'll have to stay for a while. Do you mind?"

"Not at all."

They resumed their seats and chatted for more than an hour. He forgot to smoke. He was so interested in what she said and how she said it. It surprised him very much that not once did she resort to slang.

"I'll make you a cup of tea," he suggested.

"I'd rather you didn't," she said.

"Don't you care for it?"

"I do. But I can't see a man making it. I'll drink some if you'll let me make it."

"That would be delightful," he agreed readily. "Come, let me show you my kitchen."

It seemed to Vida that she got a bigger thrill from drinking tea with him at the little table, than she did from the entire party the night before.

She didn't have to ask the reason. Her heart was singing it into her ears. She was in love with Owen!

"I'm afraid you had better not wait for Alice," he said some time later. "I'll row you across."

As he helped Vida into his boat, she remembered Alice's words: "No girl has ever been in that boat. That's why we call it 'No-Girl's-Land.'"

ALICE greeted Vida with a big, broad grin when she entered the house.

"I guess I'm little Miss Fix-it, all rightee," Alice said. "And don't you dare tell me you're angry because of the little trick I played on you. You look happy enough to kiss your enemies, if you could possibly have any. And furthermore, you're entitled to the first prize, a fur-lined bathtub, for being the first girl to penetrate No-Girl's-Land. I was at the window when he brought you to the pier and I saw it all."

Vida hugged Alice gratefully.

"You're the best little cousin a girl ever had. And I'm going to tell you a secret. He made an appointment with me for to-morrow. He's coming over here to take me back to the island. You won't mind, will you?"

"Not in the least. Kenneth is coming and it seemed to me I saw something in his eye that looked like a marriage proposal."

"You'll accept him, won't you?"

"And how!" Alice answered. "He's the only man in the world I'd ever want to settle down with."

Owen came for Vida the next day and took her back to his island. Somehow or other it gave Vida a feeling as if they were all alone in the world. And even though the mainland was four miles away, there was no fear in her heart. She would trust herself to Owen any place.

They went fishing and caught some sea bass. Then they returned to the cabin. Owen wanted to show her how well he could cook. But she wouldn't hear of it. She didn't like to see a man fussing in the kitchen. She told him to go in and smoke his pipe while she prepared the dinner.

Never had she set a table so gladly as she did this one. A little lump rose in her throat. How happy she would be if she could do this always—if she were his wife!

He was very enthusiastic about the meal. And he was very talkative too. He told Vida a few things about himself and then switched the conversation to her. He seemed to be very curious about her people and wanted to know all about them.

It was fully two hours before they got up from the table.

"I guess we'd better throw the rest of that fish out," he said.

"Oh, no," Vida replied quickly. The training of a lifetime can't be forgotten so easily. It would be a terrible waste. I can make you a little salad out of that for the evening."

He smiled good-naturedly. That reminded her that he was rich and didn't have to eat left-overs. Waves of heat went to her face. Why couldn't she forget that she was poor?

"That's a splendid idea," he said, noticing her confusion. "I'll be glad to have it. You'll be gone then and it'll remind me of you."

The afternoon was hot, but Vida had not brought her bathing suit. For some reason or other, even though she was broadminded enough to come to the island and spend the day with him, still she could not reconcile herself to undressing in his cabin.

They sat around in the living room. He showed her his books. And he was amazed at how many of them she had read.

Before it grew dark he decided to take her back. It was then for the first time during the entire day that he touched her. He took hold of her arm as they walked down the path to the beach.

A pleasant feeling swept over Vida. Her whole body tingled. It made her feel so much closer to him.

It had been a glorious day. Happy under the silk coverings of her bed, she could still remember the pressure of his fingers on her arm.

THEY met often after that. When Vida asked him to come to Preston, he accepted her invitation eagerly. He was even willing to go out on parties. Alice and Kenneth, he and Vida, often went adventuring in his motor boat.

"We're going to have a party Saturday night," Alice said to Vida one day. "The folks are going on a yachting trip. We'll have the house to ourselves. Nothing fussy. Just the usual gang. But there's going to be a big surprise at the end. It's a secret and you're the only one I'm telling it to. Kenneth is coming down with a square shaped diamond and we're going to announce our engagement!"

"Oh, Alice," Vida cried. "I'm so

glad. You're going to be very happy with him. He's wonderful."

"I want you to ask Owen down," Alice said. "Perhaps he'll take the hint and do the same thing by our Vida."

Vida turned her head. She knew that if Alice looked at her she would see how eagerly she wished it. Owen spent part of every day with her now, but not once had he mentioned a word of love. Not once did he attempt to kiss her or embrace her. Her heart was crying for him, but his ears were deaf. He treated her as a brother would treat a sister of whom he was fond.

Sometimes she felt that the only reason he went with her was because she amused him with her ways and her talk.

She would be going home soon. Back to that dismal town and the dull, monotonous life. She would go back with memories—happy memories.

But she would also go back with a broken heart.

She remembered the talk they had in his cabin the first day. He had asked her if the going back would be tragic. She had felt confident then that it would not be. But now it was different. She only liked him then. But now she was madly in love with him. Every part of her being was crying for him.

It would be impossible to forget him. He was in her heart and could never be removed. Perhaps it would have been better if she had never come to Preston and had never seen him!

VIDA dressed with infinite care. She had a very charming evening gown of ivory velvet which she had not yet worn. Her mother had liked it best of all the dresses she had bought.

"That's a knockout," Alice remarked. "You've never looked so beautiful before. If I were a man I'd fall in love with you."

It did Vida's heart good to hear it. She wanted to look especially beautiful to-night. Not for other men. Just for one man. Owen.

"We'll look like twins," Alice said. "I'm wearing ivory too. But I don't mind. I wish you were my sister."

The maid tapped at the door of the boudoir.

"A long distance telephone, Miss Alice," she said.

"It must be from Kenneth," Alice guessed. "Did you switch it to this phone, Marie?"

"Yes, Miss Alice."

Alice picked up the French phone. "Hello, darling.—What?—But you must come.—It'll spoil the whole party. —Oh, I hate business.—All right.—Good-by."

Alice hung up the phone and turned to Vida.

"Isn't that terrible? Kenneth is tied up in a conference and doesn't think he'll be able to get here. I'm not to worry. He'll be here early in the morning. Isn't that enough to make you feel like biting nails?"

"I guess he must have tried very hard to get out of it," Vida was ready to excuse him. "After all, he must watch his career."

The guests began to arrive about seven o'clock. Vida stood with Alice to receive them.

Eight o'clock passed and there was no sign of Owen. Vida felt sad. She danced with other men, but her eyes were always on the door.

Nine o'clock. Her heart sank. She had taken such pains in dressing and he was not here to see her. Evidently he didn't care for her. He probably was using this means of breaking off their friendship.

She tried to be merry. Tried to show that she didn't mind his absence. But she couldn't pretend. She felt like running up to her room and crying. Tearing off the ivory gown and going to bed.

Alice understood her feeling and never left Vida alone. She gathered her and her partner into her own group every time.

At ten o'clock Owen came. Vida should have been angry, but she was so glad to see him there was no other thought in her mind.

And she felt happy when she saw his eyes wandering over the ballroom searching for her. It seemed to her that they brightened when he spotted her. Without a moment's hesitation, he came to her.

"I'm very sorry," he said. "I'll tell you why later."

The music began and he took her in his arms. It seemed to Vida that he was holding her closer than he usually did. Perhaps it was only that she imagined the thing she desired.

Some one tried to cut in.

"Sorry, old man," Owen said. "Not to-night."

Vida wondered what he meant by that. His words sounded foreboding.

When the dance ended he took her arm and led her out of the ballroom.

"It's a nice night to be outdoors," he said. "Let's take a walk in the garden."

The night, however, was far from nice. The moon was hidden and there were threatening clouds in the sky that foretold a storm.

"I hope it doesn't rain," Vida exclaimed in dismay.

"The weather is pretty far from my thoughts just now," he answered, looking into her eyes.

They walked through the garden, past the fountain with its myriad of tiny red and blue electric lights that shone on the water, and over to a marble bench beneath a tree.

Vida sat down and Owen settled himself beside her. For several moments, filled with night sounds from the garden, they sat in silence.

Then he spoke:

"When are you going home, Vida?"

She felt as if the earth had given way beneath her feet. He had seemed so close, so interested, she had been led to believe that he cared for her. Every word he said had seemed to carry a double meaning, which as she interpreted it, made her heart sing.

But now he was asking her when she she was going home. Her stay in Preston was getting too long for him. He wanted to know when he wouldn't see her any more.

"In two weeks," she answered coldly.

"I'd like to go home with you, Vida," he said in a voice that was a bit unsteady.

HIS words were so unexpected that she gasped. With a quick movement she turned to him and grasped his arm.

"Owen!" she cried. "What did you say?"

His eyes were filled with tenderness as he answered, "I said I'd like to go home with you, Vida. I love you. I want to go back with you to your people. I'm sure I'll love them too."

Her fingers trembled as they went up his arm and touched his face.

"You love me?" she questioned as if she couldn't believe it.

Oh, she had hoped for it, prayed for it, and cried for it, and now that it had actually happened, she couldn't realize it!

"Yes, dearest," he answered. "You are the most beautiful girl in the world. You're the sweetest and most charming. I love you dearly. I've loved you for a long time. And I'm hoping you love me."

"I do, I do," she cried. "I've always loved you, Owen. You stole my heart when you kissed me at the station. And I've been dreadfully miserable because I thought you didn't care."

He put his arms around her and drew her soft, yielding body to him. Vida trembled. Her heart beat like mad as he sought her lips in a tender kiss that transported her to another world, a world of most exquisite happiness.

Her lips clung to his, quivering with the thrill of the contact. His warm breath on her face was like a gentle breeze from heaven. Timidly her arms went around his neck and she ran her fingers through his hair.

"Owen, dearest," she whispered. "I've waited all my life for you."

"And I've waited for you too," he answered. "You're one girl in a million—with your quaint old-fashioned charm that makes you so adorable. I hope you never change."

"And I hope I'll always be what you want me to be."

She snuggled closer to him. Oh, it was so enchanting to feel his arms around her. It was pure bliss to lean her head against his shoulder.

And when he framed her face with his hands, looked deep into her eyes and kissed her, she felt that she would gladly die for him. Vida had reached a height of happiness far beyond her sweetest dreams.

He fumbled in his vest pocket and drew out a small plush-covered box. A bit of pressure from his thumb and the lid flew back. Vida was dazzled by the brilliance of a sparkling pear-shaped diamond solitaire.

"That is why I was late," he smiled at her.

Vida caught her breath. The ring must be frightfully expensive.

"For me?" she asked.

"No one else could have it," he answered.

He placed it on her finger and kissed her hand.

Vida could hardly talk. She was overcome with emotion. Life was so generous to her.

She put her hands on Owen's shoulders. "You're the dearest man in the world," she said as she kissed him. "But I'm afraid you'll spoil me with such expensive gifts."

"No, dear," he assured her. "Jewels could never change you. You'd be the same little Vida even if you were covered from head to foot with diamonds."

"It's too bad it's so late now," she mused.

"What?"

"I'd love to send my mother a wire. It would make her so happy. But I'll have to wait until the morning. She'd be terribly frightened if she received a telegram during the night."

"I have a better idea," he said. "We won't send her a wire. We'll just walk in the front door together. And after I kiss her, I'll ask her if she'll let me marry her little girl. How does that sound?"

"Fine. I know she'll love you. And so will dad too."

"That reminds me," he said. "We'll have to do somtehing for your dad. And you'll have to get him in the right frame of mind. I've got a few good propositions for him."

"Oh, you dear, you're so thoughtful. It would be wonderful if you

could help dad. Mother works so hard."

VIDA could picture herself walking in the front door with Owen. How proud she would be to introduce him to her mother. Life was going to be rosy for all of them. Owen would help her father find his proper place in the world. They would free themselves of poverty. And her mother would live as she had been accustomed to living when a girl.

"Let's go back now," Vida suggested. "I'll burst if I keep this good news to myself much longer. I must tell Alice."

"You're happy, dear?" he patted her hand.

"Very happy," she answered.

When they reached the house he spoke: "I've never been through this before and I'm afraid it'll be too embarrassing for me. The girls will think it their duty to kiss me and I'm not very strong on that stuff. Do you mind if I sneak away until the first excitement dies down?"

"You won't stay away long, will you?"

"Not a minute longer than necessary."

With a happy heart Vida went in search of Alice. She looked all over the ballroom but couldn't find her. She then made a search of the anterooms. Finally she asked one of the girls.

"I saw Alice going out into the garden with Larry," was the answer.

She didn't like that one bit. Of all the people she had met through Alice, Larry was the only one whom she disliked. He was a very handsome man with very little character. There was something about him that fascinated women. And he played with them as if they were toys.

He was of the type who bragged he could kiss any girl if he were alone with her for ten minutes.

Kenneth, Alice's sweetheart, disliked him just as much as Vida did. Kenneth tolerated him at first, but afterwards persisted that Alice leave him out of the parties.

Vida felt that Larry must have come to this party uninvited. Alice would never have dared invite him, especially on the evening when she expected to announce her engagement to Kenneth.

But it was just like Larry, with his boldness and brazenness, to come to a place where he was not welcome. Vida was glad that Kenneth was not coming that night. The sight of Larry would have made him very angry.

Evidently, Larry must have come to the party while Vida was in the garden with Owen. The garden was so big and there were so many paths and shrubs in it, one could easily pass others without being seen.

Vida stepped out on the balcony that overlooked the garden. Her eyes searched for Alice's ivory gown. And just as the moon fought its way out from behind a threatening cloud, she spied her cousin.

Vida's blood ran cold. Alice and Larry were sitting on a bench. He had his arms around her and he was kissing her.

"The rotten cad!" she said to herself as she clenched her fists.

Larry knew that Alice was Kenneth's sweetheart. He ought to be horsewhipped for coming here.

Vida felt that Alice was not to blame. She was frisky and wild, but her love for Kenneth was honest. Alice had felt very downhearted because Kenneth couldn't come this evening and Larry with his fascinating ways and his flattering speeches must

have swept her off her feet. She probably did not realize what she was doing.

Vida decided to put an end to it. She'd go over there and drag Alice away from Larry.

BUT at that very moment some one stepped out on the further end of the balcony. Vida clapped her hand over her mouth to prevent herself from crying out.

It was Kenneth!

What was he doing here? He had telephoned Alice that he was tied up in a conference and didn't think it would be possible for him to come that night. But he must have got away and decided to come out even though it was very late.

Had someone told him that Alice was in the garden with Larry? What if he should see them together there—see Larry kissing Alice?

Vida felt certain that the men would come to blows. But what would happen to Alice? Would Kenneth believe that she was not to blame?

A shudder went through Vida. She felt in her heart that Kenneth would denounce Alice. That he would walk out of her life forever.

Another threatening cloud swept over the face of the moon and cast a deep shadow over the garden. Alice could not be seen so plainly now. Her gown was visible, but her face could not be distinguished.

With a sinking heart Vida saw Kenneth clench his fists and go down the steps of the balcony. Had he recognized Alice sitting on the bench with Larry?

Vida clasped and unclasped her hands nervously. Why was she standing there? She must do something. Alice's happiness—Alice's future was at stake. She must save her. But how?

To call off Kenneth was impossible. Once he had made his mind up to do something, he could not be swerved.

Like a flash of lightning an idea entered Vida's mind. The color of her dress was the same as Alice's. Suppose she went there and took Alice's place? From the balcony he could not have been certain that it was Alice. And when he reached the spot and saw the same ivory colored gown, he would believe that Vida had been there all the time.

On the instant Vida decided to go through with the plan. She loved Alice. And Alice had been so good to her. In fact she owed all her happiness to Alice. If Alice hadn't invited her to Preston, she would never have met Owen.

Vida knew the garden like the fingers of her hand. She could beat Kenneth to the spot by taking the short cut. She raced like a madman and was breathless when she reached the spot. She seized Alice's arm and pulled her to her feet.

"Quick," she hissed. "Hide behind the shrubs. Kenneth is coming."

"Oh!" Alice cried like one who is suddenly awakened from a terrible dream.

And as she ran for the shrubs, Larry made a move to follow her. What a coward he was, Vida thought.

She caught his arm and stopped him.

"No," she said. "You stay here. I'll sit with you. Put your arms around me and pretend that I've been here all the time."

She hated his arms around her. She hated to be sitting near him. But it had to be done. It was the only way to insure Alice's future happiness.

She sat that way for several mo-

ments. Then, from the turn of the path, Kenneth suddenly loomed before them.

He stepped back a pace when he recognized Vida.

"Oh!" he said, with a sigh of relief. "I'm sorry to interrupt. I'm very sorry."

Vida looked at him, but did not answer. Larry's arms were still around her, but she didn't mind them now. She was so happy that her plan had turned out so successfully. She had saved Alice.

But something to which she had not given a second's consideration happened just then. In her excitement, she had forgotten all about herself. She had forgotten that she was supposed to be looking for Alice to tell her of her engagement. She had forgotten that Owen had promised to join her very shortly.

But now, with a stab of pain through her heart, she remembered. Because Owen had just turned the path and was standing before her!

He had come to find her and he found her in Larry's arms!

AS if a sudden stroke had paralyzed her body, Vida sat there helpless.

As long as she lived, she would never forget the look on Owen's face. It was a look of disappointment and disillusion. The sorrowful look of a man who discovers he has been living in a fool's paradise. The look of a man whose world has crashed at his feet.

His hands went up to his face as if to shut out the sight.

"Ugh!" he grunted.

There was disgust, horror and heartbreak in his cry.

He turned on his heel and stumbled back to the path.

Vida opened her lips to call to him, but stopped. Kenneth was still there. Even if Owen should consent to listen, and she hardly expected him to, in the face of what he had witnessed, she dared not tell him the truth. It meant spoiling Alice's life.

Kenneth advanced to Larry with his fists clenched and murder in his eyes.

"I'm going to punch your head off," he roared. "I'll break that handsome face of yours. You must have tricked her to sit with you. You're not fit to wipe her shoes."

"Wait a minute—" Larry started to speak.

Vida jumped up from the bench and stood between the two men.

"Keep quiet!" she cried to Larry. If he dared tell the truth, then all her work would go to nought.

Then she turned to Kenneth, "Please don't touch him. I knew what I was doing. Please go away."

Reluctantly, Kenneth left.

"I advise you," Vida said to Larry, "to leave without being seen. You'll find it very unpleasant to remain at the party."

"Don't worry," he said. "I have no desire to stay here any longer."

He went away and she was left alone. She sank down on the bench. Her head and her shoulders drooped as if she were carrying a heavy burden.

Her heart was like lead. The world seemed to be growing darker every moment. And she felt weary, very weary.

The clouds which had threatened all evening were now fulfilling their threat. The rain came. But Vida did not notice it.

There seemed to be no feeling in her body at all. That look on Owen's face. She would never forget it. It would haunt her.

She had killed his love. She had driven away the man to whom she had given her heart.

The tears rolled down her cheeks and mingled with the rain on her face.

"Oh, why did he have to come at that moment?" she cried.

For what she had done, she had no regret. She had to do it. She would never have forgiven herself if she had not made every effort to save Alice.

But why should she be compelled to pay such a heavy price?

She glanced down at the ring he had given her. What a glorious future there had seemed to be for her and her people. And now, what a tragedy it was!

VIDA could not remember how long she sat there in the garden.

It was only when a terrific storm broke with the suddenness of all Atlantic storms that she realized where she was.

The rain came down in torrents. The wind whipped the shrubs with a giant lash. Vida ran to the house, arriving drenching wet.

"Have you been out in the garden all this time?" Alice cried, as she entered the door.

"Yes," she answered limply.

"You had better go right up and change your clothes, Vida. Come, I'll go with you." She took hold of her cousin's hand and squeezed it affectionately. "I'll never forget what you did for me, Vida. I'll always be grateful to you. I ran back to the house and was here before Kenneth returned. I was a fool to go out in the garden with Larry."

So Alice did not know what had happened!

Two girls stood in the foyer as Alice and Vida reached it. Vida heard one of them mention Owen's name, and she stopped abruptly.

"I think he's crazy," the girl said. "I was at the beach when he came rushing down. I spoke to him and he growled at me. I thought he was going to bite me. He jumped into his boat, grabbed the oars and started pulling for the island. He must be caught in this storm and he'll have a fine time getting to the island."

"Don't you think we ought to tell some of the boys?" the other girl asked. "He may need help."

"Still sweet on him?" the first girl queried amusedly.

Alice turned to Vida with startled eyes. "Why did he run away? Did you have a quarrel?"

But Vida was not listening to her. Her brain was working feverishly. Owen was out there in the ocean in this terrible storm! What chance did he have in a rowboat?

A thousand frightful things flashed through her mind. The waves would swamp his boat. And then what? Could he swim for miles against that storm and those waves?

Oh, it was horrible! The man she loved out there in the inky darkness, all alone, battling for his life!

Why was she standing here? Why didn't she go to help him? He was her man. If he died, she wanted to die with him. Life without him was not endurable.

It was all her fault. She had driven him to it. The sight of her in Larry's arms had maddened him. He wanted to escape from her and everybody else. He wanted to go back to the shelter of his island.

If he died, she would be guilty of his death. She had sent him to it.

She released Alice's grip on her hand and ran for the door.

"Vida," Alice cried. "Where are you going?"

Vida opened the door and a blast of wind and rain almost took her breath away. It required every ounce of her strength to shut the door against the gale.

The rain beat down on her head like tiny hammers as she ran for the pier. The wind whipped at her skirts. Her satin slippers were soaking wet. The heels seemed to stick every time she buried them in the sand.

Off came the slippers. Now she could run faster. Every minute — every second counted. She prayed that she would not be too late.

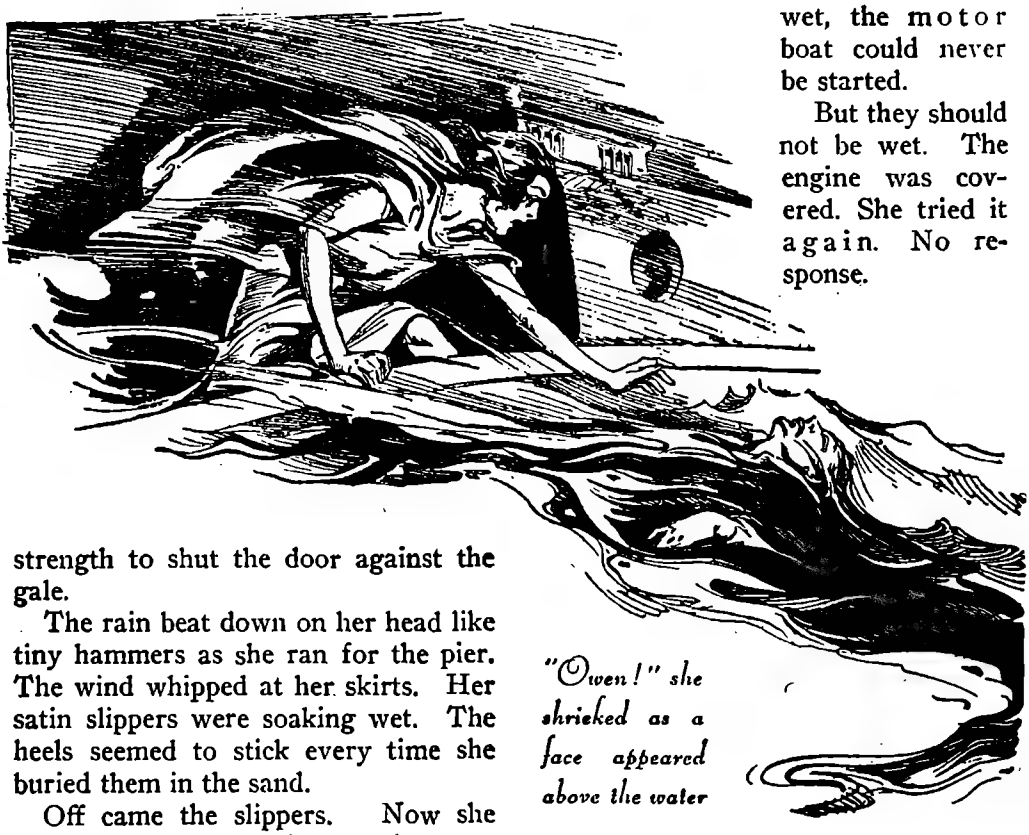
A FLASH of lightning lit up the beach. There was the pier before her. And the motor boat was tied to the pier.

She wiped her face with her hand. The rain dropped down from her hair and her nose. But she was not aware of any physical discomfort.

It was her spirit that was carrying her on. The spirit of a woman going to save the man she loves.

Now she was on the pier. She threw off the painter and jumped into the boat. She tried the engine, but it would not catch. Oh, she had been worrying about that while she was running! If the wires were wet, the motor boat could never be started.

But they should not be wet. The engine was covered. She tried it again. No response.



"Owen!" she shrieked as a face appeared above the water

What would she do now? Go after him in a rowboat? It was four miles to his island.

She prayed, as she had been taught by her mother when she was a little girl. She prayed for help.

She tried the engine again and again.

Finally she got a sputter. The wires were not wet. They were only damp.

She could have cried for joy when the engine caught and she heard the familiar put-put-put. She knew in which direction the island lay and headed straight for it.

The rain beat faster. Sometimes it calmed, then it became furious. It penetrated her dress, it penetrated her underclothes and she could feel it on her body. She was a mass of wetness.

Her eyes searched the ocean, but the only time she could see was when the lightning flashed. But it passed in an instant—then there was pitch darkness.

She put her hand to her mouth and shouted as loud as she could, "Owen, Owen!"

But how could she expect him to hear against that wind?

She found some matches in the boat. They were dry, but she had nothing to use them on. There wasn't a scrap of paper on the boat. She should have thought of making a torch so Owen could see that help was coming. Or of getting a lantern in the basement of the house.

Was he still alive? Could he battle the wind and the ocean?

The engine was hot now and she felt she could take a chance and shut it off. She'd be able to start it again. Perhaps with that put-put-put out of her ears, she might be able to hear Owen. He might be calling for help.

For a moment she drifted, her ears sharpened for the sound of his voice. But all she heard was the wind and the rain beating down on her boat.

A flash of lightning lit up the water. Not very far away, Vida thought she saw a rowboat.

She started the engine and made her way cautiously to the spot. She was almost on top of it before she saw it.

It was overturned!

HER heart sank. What had happened to Owen? She was certain that she was fully three miles from his island. He couldn't swim that distance in this terrible sea!

He must be near by. There was only one thing to do — hover around this spot and wait for a flash of lightning. She had been guided to his boat. So she hoped and prayed that she would be guided to him.

Her body was tense. Her ears were sharpened. There was a peculiar quickening in her heart. Something told her that her lover was near.

She unloosened the rope that was tied around the iron cleat in the boat and wound it like a lasso ready to throw to him if she saw him.

The seconds seemed to drag by like hours while she waited for the next flash of lightning. Holding on with a firm grip she stood up in the boat. If she didn't see him, he might see her and call to her.

There it was. A flash of lightning. Her eyes devoured the water hungrily.

"Owen!" she shrieked. A head and an arm were raised for a moment above the water!

He was there to her left. No use throwing the rope. He would never see it. And it was too dangerous to wait for another flash of lightning. He had moved his hand as if he were exhausted.

She maneuvered the boat very slowly. She must be very careful and not run into him. Her eyes searched the darkness, searched for that white face.

Now she saw him. She shut off the motor. She leaned over and stretched out her hand as far as she could. The boat was drifting towards him. Just a little more. A little closer. Now she had him. She clamped her fingers in the collar of his shirt with a grip that could not be loosened.

He was exhausted. He had no more strength. His body was dead weight. But in Vida there was born the strength and courage of love. Now that she had

found her man, she was not going to give him up. He belonged to her and not to the sea. She'd get him into the boat or she'd go overboard with him.

Trying to lift him into the boat was a task that took all of Vida's strength. Once or twice the boat threatened to capsize. But she held on to him tenaciously. Now she had his chest over the boat. Now his waist.

Vida was panting for breath. With a last superhuman effort, she managed to drag him aboard.

He lay in a huddle in the bottom of the boat, with his head sunk on his chest.

The girl dropped beside him. She took his head in her arms and kissed the lips wet from the ocean.

"Owen! Owen!" she called to him.

But there was no answer. His head rested lifeless on her breast.

A heart-rending cry escaped from Vida's lips. Was she too late? Had she found him only to lose him forever? She put her ear to his heart and listened. Oh, that rain and wind—why didn't it stop? She couldn't hear a thing. She couldn't hear a single heart beat.

The bottom of the boat was a pool of water and when she got up, it was above her ankles.

Tears were streaming down her cheeks as she went to the engine and started it again.

It felt weird to be standing at the wheel of the boat, out there in the ocean, with the body of her sweetheart resting in the pool of water. It was like a death ship.

VIDA brushed the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. Oh, why hadn't she gone down with him.

She shook her head as if to clear her brain. The boat had been drifting around and for the moment she had lost all sense of direction. Where was Preston? And where was Owen's island.

It was impossible to tell in the inky darkness.

Then she remembered. The wind had been to her right when she started out. So, if she wanted to return to Preston, she must have the wind to her left. But suppose the wind had changed its direction. Then she would be heading out to sea!

Vida decided to keep to her course. She couldn't be more than a mile and a half from Preston. She would go that distance and then stop for bearings. It would be better to drift around then until daybreak rather than risk going out to sea.

She steered blindly. She couldn't see because of the tears that were blurring her eyes. Only a short while ago, Owen had been warm flesh and blood and now—

Suddenly lights were before her eyes. White lights that danced in the air. She strained her eyes through the darkness trying to make sure that she was not imagining.

But the lights persisted. They danced in the form of circles now. And then it dawned upon her that the lights were lanterns that were being swung on the beach.

She headed the boat in the direction of the lanterns.

A flash of lightning followed by a loud peal of thunder lit up the shore. Vida recognized Preston, the beach and the pier.

She ran the motor boat right on to the beach. The figures with the lanterns came rushing to her.

Alice was the very first one.

"Vida!" she cried. "I'm so glad you're safe!" She held her lantern up to Vida's tear-stained eyes. "Then you didn't find Owen?" she whispered tensely.

"I did," Vida answered monotonously. "He's in the boat— He's dead."

THE group gathered around Vida. She recognized Kenneth and three of the men. Their raincoats glistened in the rain.

"Two of you fellows get Owen," Kenneth directed. "I'll take Vida. And you, Dick, hop in a car and get Dr. Lawrence. Quick, man!"

Kenneth grasped Vida's arm, but she brushed him off.

"Leave me alone," she cried out hysterically. "Leave me alone."

She got out of the boat and began to walk. There was a ringing in her ears. The ground seemed to be moving in circles at her feet. She swayed from side to side. Then she stumbled and fell.

Kenneth rushed to her. He picked her up in his arms and carried her back to Preston. Alice walked beside him.

"What shall I do, Ken?" she kept sobbing. "Let me help too."

"Get all the blankets you can," he ordered. "Make hot drinks and dig up some hot water bottles."

Alice ran ahead of him to the house. "It's all my fault," she moaned over and over.

Kenneth carried his wet burden up to her room. There Alice undressed her and wrapped her in a big warm blanket. Then she took a towel, wiped her cousin's face and dried her hair. She threw two more blankets on her and called Kenneth in.

Vida was deathly pale. Not a drop of color in her face. She lay on the bed with her eyes shut. Only the slight heaving of the blankets told that she was alive.

Kenneth advanced to the bed with a small glass in his hand. He raised Vida's head and told her to drink it. She opened her lips and when the burning liquid touched her throat she coughed. She tried to push it away but Kenneth insisted that she drink it.

"Now put some hot water bottles to her feet," Kenneth said, "until the doctor comes. I don't think she's been in the water at all. But she's been exposed to rain all the time in that thin dress."

"I'll never forgive myself if anything happens to her," Alice said tensely.

"She deserves the best in the world. If ever a girl had courage, Vida is the girl. And she's so quiet and shy, you'd never believe it was in her. That's the old pioneer stock. Women who would brave anything for their men."

"And Owen?" Alice asked timidly.

"The boys are working on him. But whether there's a chance we won't know until the doctor comes. I'll go down now. Don't let her get uncovered."

Alice heard a car roll up the driveway. It must be the doctor. She waited more than ten minutes but he didn't come up. He must have seen Owen first.

A FULL half hour passed. Alice felt that it was good news. If Owen were gone, the doctor would have known it immediately. There must be a chance for him.

Finally the doctor came to examine Vida.

"She has a powerful heart," the doctor remarked. "But she'll have to remain in bed for at least a week. We must be very careful that pneumonia

doesn't set in. She caught a very bad cold."

When the physician left Kenneth returned.

"Owen was half drowned," he whispered to Alice. "But we've got all the water out of him now. Vida must have found him at the critical moment. Another few minutes and he would have gone down.

"She must have listened to his heart and thought him dead. I don't wonder. It was hard to hear the beat even with the stethoscope. He was pretty far gone.

"The doctor ordered him kept in bed. I'll stay up with him to-night. And you stay up with Vida. We'll get some nurses in the morning."

Vida cried out in her sleep several times. The incidents of the night kept repeating themselves in her feverish brain. Over and over she re-enacted the rescue of Owen. Her fingers clutched at the blanket as she had clutched at his collar to drag him into the boat.

"I'm losing him. I'm losing him," she cried out. "Oh, give me strength!"

Alice sat at her beside and stroked her forehead gently, gradually soothing her back to sleep.

A bright and happy sun shone into the room the next morning. A sun to wipe out all traces of last night's storm and havoc. A sun to bring good cheer and happiness.

Vida opened her eyes and saw Alice sitting beside her.

"I don't remember going to bed last night," Vida said.

"We put you to bed," Alice informed her. "How do you feel, dear?"

"Oh, yes. Now I remember." Vida's eyes filled with tears. "Owen is gone."

"No, no," Alice protested. "He's alive! You thought he was dead. But he's alive. He's downstairs in bed. And when he gets well, he'll come up to see you."

"Oh, I wish it were true, but it isn't so!"

"Vida, please listen to me. I've never lied to you. And I'm not lying to you now. Owen is alive. Kenneth is staying with him now."

Vida looked into Alice's eyes and saw that she was telling the truth.

THE next morning two nurses arrived to take care of the patients. Dr. Lawrence called every day and was well pleased with the progress they made.

At the end of the week he told the nurse that Vida could sit up in the chair near the window. Alice brought out Vida's prettiest negligee and helped her put it on. Then she gave her her own favorite kimono, a pretty embroidered silk that her father had brought from China. She wheeled Vida over to the window and drew the curtains aside. Then she motioned to the nurse and the two of them left the room.

Vida looked out over the ocean. It was calm and quiet. The air was clear and in the distance she could see Owen's island. What happy days she had spent there! Would she ever know such days again?

After seeing her in Larry's arms, Owen would always believe that she had been untrue to him.

Vida was helpless. She could not undo what had already happened. Her lips were sealed forever. She dared not tell the truth. It meant jeopardizing Alice's happiness.

She heard the door open and turned her head.

Then she gasped and her hand went to her heart.

Owen!

He looked very pale and weak. He walked slowly, not with that heavy stride of which she had been so fond. He drew up a chair in front of her and sat down—so close that their knees touched.

Vida wondered if he could hear the loud pounding of her heart.

He leaned forward, took hold of her hands and rested them in her lap. Pale as she was, a bit of color mounted to her face. And his face looked warmer too.

"I don't know just how to start," he said with a throb in his deep voice, "so I'll start by telling you that I love you."

Her lips quivered and she blinked her eyes to keep back the tears.

"I hope I haven't lost your love, Vida."

"Oh, Owen!" Her throat tightened unbearably. "You can never lose that."

"You little darling," he pressed her hands feverishly. "Kenneth told me what a brave girl you were. You saved my life and now it's yours to do with as you please."

So he was offering himself to her because of gratitude. As a reward for saving his life. No, no, she didn't want him under those conditions.

"Is that why you love me?" she asked.

"Well," he answered, "that's one of the reasons. But Kenneth told me of another act of bravery. Alice told him. I'm referring to the part you played in the garden.

"I'm ashamed of myself, Vida, for ever doubting you. I should never have misjudged you that way. I should have known that you are loyal and true. I should have known that there must be some good explanation for your actions.

"But I'm so terribly in love with you. And when I saw you there in Larry's arms, I just lost my reason. Try and forgive, dearest."

"Try?" she repeated as she raised his hands and pressed them to her cheeks. "Oh, Owen—" And then she could say no more.

Her heart was overflowing with happiness. She had her sweetheart back again. Owen was her's now forever and ever. The clouds of doubt and misunderstanding had been swept away. Love reigned supreme.

"But darling," she asked suddenly. "What of Kenneth and Alice?"

"They're as happy as two love birds. Kenneth thinks, and I agree with him, that you two are the most wonderful girls in the world. You are sacrificing yourself to save Alice, and Alice risking everything to save you. Kenneth thinks more of Alice now than he ever did before."

"Oh, I'm so glad!"

"And Kenneth offered a very fine suggestion," Owen continued. "He wants us to spend our honeymoons together."

"That would be just wonderful."

Owen shifted his chair and drew it close to Vida's. He put his arm around her and she leaned her head against his shoulder happily and contentedly.

Their hearts beat as one.

Sage Brush Valentine

A blood red arrow through a paper heart threatens to become a dagger of remorse in the heart of wilful Celie

By Francine Findley

Author of "And the Pursuit of Happiness"

TWICE Celie Muir smiled uncertainly into the dark eyes bent upon hers so compellingly, twice she smiled and shook her head.

"But Señor Amores, I couldn't. Enter a beauty contest? My father would skin me alive—and if it's true that beauty is only skin-deep, it 'd be a bad break for my hopes of winning, wouldn't it?"

The tall young Mexican beside her flashed his white teeth in an ingratiating little smile.

"But, señorita, it is impossible that you do not enter. I should be completely devastated. This morning as I see you ride by with the straw-haired

gringo, I cannot contain myself! I follow you—I wait until he takes himself into the shop of Maria—I bend myself to beg—without you now there could be no contest. My heart is not in it!"

Celie shook her head. She was still smiling when Fred Johnson, the "straw-haired gringo" with whom she had ridden into the little Mexican town of Galina that morning, waved at her from across the wide rambling main street.

She had known Fred pretty nearly all of her life, and she knew perfectly the business that had brought him into Galina this morning. He had come for the express purpose of buying one of the trinkets of matrix and silver displayed in the shop of Maria. It was to be a valentine gift to her—one to add to the twelve others that she had received each year from the time when they had been kids in the district school together.

Fred had loved her just that long.

HER eyes shifted from the approaching Fred to the Mexican beside her, and her cheeks flushed brightly. What was the matter with her? What was there about this man who had so boldly accosted her in the streets with his fantastic proposition that made her look upon Fred suddenly as dull, uninteresting? Why did her heart beat so when this Amores, this elaborately dressed Mexican in his exquisite doeskin riding breeches with the sash of scarlet silk about his waist, flashed his white teeth at her and told her she was beautiful?

Fred's eyes dilated as he took in the Mexican in all his glory. He looked an unvoiced question as Celie presented the romantic figure.

"Señor Amores has been trying to persuade me to enter the beauty contest that is to be held on St. Valentine's Day, Fred. He is promoting the contest, and he says—"

Fred laughed.

"I can just picture it—getting up on a platform, herded together with a lot of little Juanas and Marias—like a prize heifer—" He glared down his nice blunt Anglo-Saxon nose at Amores. "What's the idea of this contest, anyway? Funny sort of thing for a Mex town."

Amores shrugged. "Funny? For a Mexican to wish to bring money into a Mexican town?—perhaps to interest the townspeople in modern ideas? Not at all, señor."

"But this isn't your town. You're a stranger here."

"It is the town of the dead uncle of my mother. I have the in-terest of it at the heart!"

Fred looked unconvinced.

"Personally, I can't see how a beauty contest is going to help the town any. Anyhow, Cele, you're not getting mixed up in any of this. It's getting along. We'd better be going. *Adios,* señor. Good luck with your contest."

He put his hand on the girl's arm and started to draw her away, but she spoke sharply, affronted at his proprietorial attitude.

"Just a moment, Fred. I've decided that it would be quite a lark—entering the contest. Señor, you may put me down!"

"Ah, señorita!" Amores bent swiftly and kissed her hand. "How happy you have made me. To have the privilege of entering so beautiful a one in my poor contest—"

Aghast, Fred interrupted: "Cele, have you lost your mind? This is a crazy—"

But Celie wasn't paying any attention to him. She was giving her name and history to Amores. Amores, the strange Mexican, who had come into the little border town a few days before with the astonishing announcement of a regular "gringo" beauty contest.

Old Maria had told Fred all about it as he'd fingered the silver trinkets in her shop:

"Me, I think he is the devil. No one knows from whence he came with his nonsense about money for the town. It is a scandal—the way the girls flock about him, listening to his soft talk. In the old days such a thing could not have happen. But the days of the *duenna* are over. To-day they run about unattended, unguarded—prey for such creatures as this unknown! Nothing but trouble will come of it!"

And here was Cele, his Cele, letting the creature kiss her hand—consenting to be entered in his filthy contest!

"You wait till your dad gets wind of this!"

Amores lifted his narrow brows.

"But—it is arrange. I shall call upon the Señor Muir—offer my felicitations—"

"You'll stay this side of the border if you know what's good for you!" Fred growled ungraciously. "And this lady is not going into your contest, you can roll that with your cigarette and smoke it."

This time he grabbed Celie forcefully and propelled her into the street. Furious, Celie glared at him as he attempted to help her on her horse, and swung herself into the saddle unaided.

"I don't need any help from you. You've done enough, Fred Johnson, for one day! Making me ridiculous before Señor Amores! And I shall enter that contest now if it's the last act of my life!"

Her face crimson with rage, she wheeled her horse toward the border and headed for home.

"Hey, Cele! Wait a minute! What do you care about that musical comedy *caballero?* For two cents I'd go back there and smash his dirty black face!"

Celie glared at him over her shoulder.

"You would. It would be just the sort of thing you'd do, Fred!"

"Aw, Cele, don't be that way! Listen. What did you go and enter that fool thing for? What possible kick can you get out of it? Besides, it's to be held on Valentine's Day—"

Celie stared at her horse's ears.

"I thought that for once I'd like to do something besides spend Valentine's Day riding around in the dust, eating a messy lunch under a fuzzy cottonwood and talking about the current market price of beef on the hoof!"

FRED'S mouth quivered. He winced as if she had struck him with her quirt. All these years Valentine's Day had been their day. Each year they'd made a gala day of it, riding about, picnicking.

It was as if she had said: "I'm tired of you and everything you do!"

A white line etched itself about his tense lips and his blue eyes grew dark.

"You know what I think? It isn't this beauty contest that interests you at all. It's that greaser Amores. When that Mex flapper, Juana, brought the wash back from Galina the other day, she told you about this bird. That's why you wanted to come with me today. What a fool I was—thinking you wanted to come to be with me!"

Celie dimpled maliciously. "Maybe you're right, Fred. You usually

are. Doesn't it bore you, always being right?"

For a moment there was silence. Then Fred asked miserably: "What's the matter with you lately, Cele? Don't you care for me any more? You're so queer—"

Celie flashed at him:

"Queer! Is it so queer that a girl isn't satisfied to think of burying herself out here for the rest of her life? Never to see anything but sagebrush and sand and a lot of cow wranglers so dumb they don't want to think or talk of anything but pasturage and fodder? Maybe I am crazy about Amores! Maybe I like his trick pants and his red sash—I'm pretty tired of looking at corduroys and overalls every day of the week including Sunday. Maybe I like to be told how beautiful I am. I could be a mud hen for all the rise I get out of you!"

Fred's face knotted, and his big hands, holding his reins, twisted nervously.

"Aw, Cele. That isn't fair. You know what I think about you—but I can't talk it to you. All I can do is live it—every day of my life—build it—I tried to put the way I feel about you into that little cottage I threw up back of that fringe of cottonwoods by the south pasture on my place—did all the finishin' myself nights — made every stick of furniture in it and painted it pretty colors—copied it out of those pictures of rooms you liked in the catalogue—I was goin' to ask you to take it—along with me, for your valentine—but—but I didn't—couldn't get up the—"

Celie's eyes grew wide. "Oh, no, Fred! You mustn't say that. You mustn't, I tell—"

His hand closed over hers and his blue eyes were pleading.

"But why, Cele? Why mustn't I say it? You must have known it all along—from that day when I gave you your first valentine—'member it, Cele? All funny little bunches of flowers and fancy-looking paper? Pa got it for me at the general store with the pennies I'd been saving for a pair of real spurs—"

"Of course I remember. I've still got it, Fred," Celie answered in a strangled voice. And then she said, her big eyes meeting his squarely: "I did know, Fred. I knew how you felt. I thought I felt the same way—until lately. Oh, Fred, I'm sorry. But I can't. I just can't. Life ought to be something more than just cottonwoods and sand. Love ought to be—must be more than — than just liking a man more than you ever have any other man. It ought to be a flame—burning—"

"If you think that guy Amores is any red hot papa, you'd better think again, Cele. Those tamales—"

Celie lost her exalted look and her red gold hair gleamed in the dying sun as she tossed her head angrily.

"You don't have to be any cruder than usual, Fred! I'll tell you one thing about Amores—he knows how to talk to a girl without being offensive!"

"You bet your life he does! Those jiggers specialize in that. Maria was telling me that all the little Mex girls fall for his line. He probably spends his nights singin' 'La Paloma' under Juana, the washlady's window. Girls all look alike to a beano like that."

"Maybe he'll sing under my window before I'm through," Celie replied wickedly.

Fred grew sober instantly.

"Listen here, Cele. Don't go flirtin' around with a Mex. You ought to

know better than that. It's just about —why, it's like playing with a rattlesnake—"

"Ought to give me quite a thrill. On the whole, I think Amores is going to add a little drama to an otherwise drab and uneventful life. Good-by, Fred. Come and see me sometime—after I've won the contest!"

Celie gave her horse a touch and waved back at him as she spurted ahead. He made no effort to catch up with her, but let his reins fall loose on his animal's neck.

AS Celie passed Fred's ranch, which adjoined her father's, she caught a glimpse of the small white cottage beneath the cottonwoods—that house he had filled with furniture fashioned and painted like the furniture she had admired in the catalogue. Standing there as if it were some animate thing waiting to belong to some one, to be loved, it caught at Celie's heart.

"Poor little lonely house! I'm sorry—but I just—can't!"

It was as if she apologized to the house for an ungracious attitude toward it. Some day some girl would come along, hang curtains at those uncurtained windows, plant flowers in the gay, empty window boxes—lay the table in the tiny dining room—but it wouldn't be Celie.

"Good-by—Valentine!" She threw a kiss to it over her shoulder in memory of all those other valentines. Tonight she'd get them all together and give them back to Fred. Maybe one day he'd get them out and show them to that other girl—the unknown girl he would finally marry—and they'd laugh about them—laugh about the times that he'd thought he was in love with Cele—

Funny—the thought of them sitting together in the living room of the house that had been built for her gave her a queer ache in her throat. The thought of them laughing at the little old crumpled valentines filled her with a sort of anger.

"What's the matter with me?" Celie asked herself as she rode through her own gate. "I don't want him—but I don't seem to want any one else to have him either!"

THE next day, true to his word, Señor Manuelito Amores arrived at the Rancho del Rosa to offer his felicitations to old Muir, and to ask permission for Celie to enter the contest.

As he came up the road Celie hung about her father's neck, pleading, coaxing. "If you say I can't—I'll do it anyway! I'm not going to have Fred laughing at me. I'm not going to have him thinking he can run me, either!"

"But what's Fred got to do with it? Any sane man would tell you you were making a fool of yourself—putting yourself on exhibition with a lot of unwashed—I'm not going to have it! You get impudent and I'll lock you up—that's what I'll do!"

And to the suave señor's deep regret, old Muir was not to be moved. "I'll have no daughter of mine making a spectacle of herself. Besides, the thing looks mighty queer to me. What's the idea? Some political stunt? I tell you you'll make more enemies than friends—"

Amores shrugged. "Not political. What has Amores to do with politicians? It is a little fancy of mine—a droll idea that came to me! Very amusing — very dramatic. Dramatic, amusing things appeal to Amores!"

"Oh, they do?" Muir looked down his nose. "Well, something very droll —and amusing — something pretty dramatic is going to happen if you don't get on that creampuff horse of yours and ride back across the border—pronto! Savvy?"

Amores lifted elegant shoulders. "Sí, señor—parfactly!" His dark eyes slid to Celie's, held hers challengingly, questioningly.

Reading that look, Celie knew that he was daring her to ignore her father's ultimatum, asking her to reassure him that she would. Then the light in his eyes flickered—grew bright with ardor. Amores was making love to her with his eyes right under her father's nose!

Vainly she tried to reason with herself that this figure in the romantic red sash was actually a figure of mystery—an unknown Mexican—but her heart laughed at her. Whatever he was, did that make the thrill of his dark glance less? Did that blur the caress of the murmured: "*Querida mia?*" as he bent to kiss her hand in departure? *Querida mia!* My dearest!

"*Adios—amigo!*" Looking straight at her father, Celie breathed the word for "friend." As her father turned away with a grunt of disgust, she gave Amores one swift glance and nodded her head.

LONG after Amores had gone she sat staring at the road that led toward the border. What had she done—to what had she committed herself by that brief nod? It was as if she had acquiesced, not only to the beauty contest, but to the possible future advances of Amores. Did she want that? The attention of this man of alien blood?

Dangerous, Fred had called such business. Her heart leaped to the word. Was there danger in listening to the love of a man like Amores? Perhaps. Even as she said it to herself doubtfully, she knew that it was true. For all the flame in his eyes, might not his heart be cold, ruthless?

Celie knew that this was so. Juana, the girl who did the washing for the Rancho del Rosa—tall, tawny, lithe Juana, who might have been a dancer had she been born in a different environment, with her black, parted hair and her Madonna-like face — Juana had married Pedro Valenzia, a vaquero who for months had sung to her outside her window on moonlit nights.

"At firs' he was dem sweet—" Juana's eyes had clouded. "I was '*querida.*' I was *chiquitina!* All tam' he sang to me while I was at my tubs—but I di'n min'. Then he grow col'—he no sing no more. He beat me! By'm by, he go off with that sister of the devil, Amparita Mendezo. Wit' his arm across her shoulders, he turn and laugh at me—"

Juana had told Celie the whole sordid little story. But—Juana had told her about Amores, too. Amores was different. No mere vaquero! He was a don—a grande! For all the mystery about him, Juana was sure of it. A grande amusing himself in this little rural town!

Of course Celie had laughed at her. But now, considering, the girl wondered. Why not? Perhaps he came from the gay metropolitan districts—perhaps he had been in Paris, Buenos Aires! Celie began to dream of far places—romantic spots that he might take her to!. With those rich, impossible clothes, that charming manner—at least the man was no peon!

The next day Juana came bearing a

note secretively slipped to Celie, under cover of her bright shawl.

"Juana is not jealous—no! Next to being loved by the señor—to be the emissary of love!" Juana was proud to have been chosen by him as the bearer of the note. The tinge of intrigue stirred her, and she bent forward to whisper in passing: "He calls you *Santa Blanca!* That is White Saint!"

Celie clenched her hands upon the note and ran away to read it. Her first love letter!

It disappointed her slightly. Amores did not write as well as he talked. Couched in rather clumsy misspelled English, the note told her how happy her determination to enter the contest had made him. Urged her to ride to Galina again before the contest if she could. This, Celie told Juana, she could not risk.

"I must be careful or I won't be able to get away at all!"

She sent no note by Juana. Just that message and an added one: "Tell him I am thinking of him!"

Later she was sorry that she had sent that last. It savored of boldness.

But the next day, when Juana came again with a slender necklet of amethyst from Amores, she thrust the gift into her blouse and was glad. Why not? If love, a thrilling secret love like this happened, was a girl to discard, disown it? Celie shook her head. But she was vaguely troubled. After all, might not this swift, flaming feeling that she had for Amores, be just infatuation—something built up out of her imaginings, her conjectures about the man, coupled with his own romantic personality? And he had said nothing definite about loving her.

And there was Fred. What about her feeling for him — about her not wanting another girl to have him, though she didn't wish to marry him herself? Why should she have that feeling about Fred? Why should the sight of that house he had built, standing alone and empty, make her heart ache so?

Was it possible that she was one of those fool, light-minded girls, unable to keep from swaying in the wind of her own emotions?

Perhaps when she saw Amores again she would know—would be able to answer all these questions which plagued her.

FRED stayed away from her until the night before St. Valentine's, and then he came to her oddly awkward, humble. A queer mist crept across her eyes as she noted that he was dressed in his best black suit—the one he kept for holidays and funerals.

He stood in the late twilight, twirling his wide hat, smiling down at her uncertainly. Beneath his freshly scraped chin glowed a bright red necktie. In spite of his clothes he was undeniably good looking. There was something so tender, so boyish about his lean tanned face — about the tall slender body. When he spoke her heart ached.

"I—I was wonderin'—if—if maybe you wouldn't kinda plan to look me an' the little house over once more, Cele. Maybe you might make up your mind that we ain't so bad—nothin' fancy, maybe—but sort of dependable—"

She had to blink fast to banish the absurd tears that would come. She couldn't say what was in her heart—that one more look wouldn't do any good. That lately her eyes had looked on glory—on the flaming fire—the thrilling brilliance of love as she had dreamed it should be. Her hand at

her throat felt the necklet of amethysts that Amores had sent her.

"I—I'll go over now, Fred—if you want me to," she said beneath her breath.

Fred shook his head. "No—to-morrow's our day. It always has been. Cele, since that time I kissed you out back of the schoolhouse." He bent forward as if he were about to kiss her then, but Celie drew back. Then her hands were on his sleeve and she was urging him to take her to see the little house immediately.

'Amores frightened her. He became somehow sinister. Suppose that he, like Juana's vaquero, should be at first "dem sweet," and then after a bit turn cold and ruthless as Juana's Pedro had done?

"Oh, Fred — take me now!" Terror, pleading in that. Pleading to which Fred was deaf.

He seized her while she screamed and struggled

It was a little as if she were pleading with him to force her to love him — to love the house so that she could not bear to leave it or him alone any longer. Something of the sort was in her mind. There in the shadows with this boy she had known practically all of her life. This boy whose every thought, whose every passing mood was as an open book to her, the thought of the dark, mysterious

"Why, gee, Cele. You're different to-night. The other day I was pretty jealous and sore. Thought you were slanting toward that Amores fellow." He caught her cold hand between his big warm ones. "But we couldn't see for sour apples to-night. I'll be around bright and early in the morning."

Celie turned from him with a low, muffled cry, and he caught her by the shoulders. "Cele! Sweetheart

What's the matter? Something botherin' you? Something Fred can help about?"

Celie shook her head dumbly. How could she tell him the thing he couldn't even guess? That his very inadequacy as a lover had led him to overlook the one chance left of holding her. If he could somehow have taken her by storm—won her in spite of herself—

"Why, there's nothing the matter, Fred. You imagine it. Something—something sort of caught in my throat, that's all." How could she tell him that that something was her heart—her heart climbing out of her breast, reaching out to him, begging him to have the strength to take it?

"Good night, Fred."

"Good night, Cele. I'll be around early!"

But she would not be there. Later, when she came back, everything—all that had lain between her and Fred—would be over. She believed now, was certain that she loved Amores. Poor, dull, unsensitive Fred! He could hear the cry of a calf lost in the clearing, but he could not hear the call of a wandering heart crying to be led home!

LONG before those at the Rancho del Rosa were stirring, Celie rose and dressed. She breakfasted at the usual hour with her father and the foreman. Then, as cautiously as possible she slipped away to the barn and got her horse. Mounted, she took a back trail that finally reached the highway almost a mile above Fred's place, then struck out toward Galina.

In the town she went to the long low building where Amores had set up a temporary office, and found that the contest was to be at ten o'clock. That pleased her. In the event that Fred came after her, the contest would be over before he could possibly arrive.

Amores took her hand in his, smiled down into her eyes. "My little white one." With a caressing hand he touched her red gold hair. "Oro!" Gold! Celie knew the word, knew the delight, the admiration blond women rouse in countries where the native women are dark.

And then he was bending his lips to hers. She caught her breath sharply.

"Some one might see!"

He laughed and caught her close, his mouth clamping down upon hers savagely. "Who cares? You are to go away with me!" Celie was trembling now, afraid of she knew not what. She'd wanted him to say he loved her—wanted this dangerous love. Well, now it was hers. Why was she frightened, shrinking? Had the savagery of that kiss shaken her? Hadn't she wanted something different?

And—going away with him! The thought of placing her hand in his, following him off across the world drove her to sudden panic. All those far places she had dreamed about! Strange how unattractive they seemed now. How dear the sand and sagebrush—even the fuzzy cottonwoods she'd thought she'd hated.

She began to struggle. Amores released her and made a little bow just as a group of dark eyed giggling girls entered in the gala attire effected for fiesta days. Back of the building used as an office a brightly draped platform had been erected, and it was to this platform that Amores led them, along with the now deeply hesitant Celie.

She stayed back from the others and spoke to Amores.

"Señor, I—I have reconsidered. After all, I do not think that I shall

take part in the contest. It—it was a foolish idea." She stared past him off down the road that led across the border. Almost she wished to see Fred's yellow hair shining in the sun. Almost she wished that he would come and force her to go back home—out of this adventure that seemed adventure no longer, but stubborn stupidity.

But the road was clear—no sign of horse or rider.

Amores shook his head.

"The señorita must not disappoint. After all, it is only a little minute—an instant of time—to pose on the platform—to gladden the eyes—"

"But it might make trouble. I am not of this town—I'm a gringo—United States. If I should win others might be angry!"

Amores laughed softly.

"And was ever there doubt but that you should win?"

"What is the prize? I haven't asked." Celie was sparring for time. If Fred had missed her—

"The most fitting prize—for a beauty contest. Love!"

The word that had once meant Fred and the little house under the cottonwoods!

What did it mean now? Celie began to shiver in the hot, white sunlight. Sunlight that had more than a promise of spring in it. Amores's dark hand slid along her arm, and then he was off the platform greeting a group of riders who had come up, broken through the clumps of townspeople who were beginning to gather.

CELIE stared down at the newcomers. A strange, fierce looking lot they were—and armed!

"Friends of mine from Sonora, come to look upon the fair flowers gathered here!"

Suppressed laughter in Amores's voice as he said it. Suppressed laughter in the voices that answered him.

"I choose the little one with the silver bracelet!"

A man with hawklike face leered up at one of the girls standing near.

"And I choose Little Red Heels!" A long, dark finger pointed at a girl wearing a pair of patent leather slippers with vermilion heels.

"I take the one with the blue shawl!"

Other choices less polite made Celie's cheeks turn crimson, drove the girls in a huddle in the center of the platform until some one singled out Celie and laid claim to her in no uncertain terms.

Amores sprang back to the platform and threw his arm about her. He faced the speaker, a blunt nosed, swart creature with a scar running diagonally across one cheek.

"Son of a dog! She is mine! The little Americano belongs to Amores! I shall kill any one who tries to take her from me!"

All suavity was gone from his voice now. All the laughter. With a sudden wrench Celie was dragged from the platform, half thrown across Amores's cream-colored horse as he mounted behind her.

"What are you doing! Where are you taking me?" Celie struggled and screamed at him as his horse broke into a gallop.

Behind them was pandemonium. The strange riders had rushed the platform, seized upon the beauty entrants and were carrying them off in the face of the astounded townspeople.

Amores held her tighter, but with his lips close to her ear answered her laughingly:

"It is that the town is to be raided.

I am Strano, the bandit! Those are my men! It was Strano's little joke—that beauty contest—to enter the town unmolested! To seize all the pretty girls without a protest. Aye, I have work hard — selecting — weeding out the undesirables—and have saved the most desirable for myself. Do you think you can learn to love me, my little dove?"

And Celie had scorned the dull safety of Fred's adoration!

The countryside swam before her eyes. Her heart beat heavily. A bandit!

"You are doing a fatal and a crazy thing! When I am missed my country—"

Amores laughed at her.

"By the time you are missed you will no longer be a citizen of your country. You will have change' all that! By marrying me! Señora Strano! Back of the hills in my casa waits the priest!"

She who had scorned to be Mrs. Fred Johnson would soon be Señora Strano! Now the little house under the cottonwoods would wait forever, but she would not come. Suns would shine over the sage and sand—moons would rise and wane, but she—

"I'll not marry you! I'll never marry you!" She tried to strike at him, but that silky, maddening laughter rang in her ears.

"You will marry me! And we shall go to Rio Janiero. No longer will I be the bandit. For you I shall become respectable! I love you even that much!"

BUT when they arrived back of the hills at the casa—a hut of stone and rubble—the priest was not there. Celie began to plead—fight against this dangerous love that she had once thought so thrilling. The bandit listened with the stoicism of an Indian. Staring at him in the half light that filtered through the open door, Celie centered on the word: Indian. More Indian than Mexican in this man who had called himself Amores.

He sat himself down to eat, and Celie shuddered at the way he tore his food between his white, flashing teeth. Animal! She was unable to eat a morsel herself—set her lips tight against the wine that he tried to force between them. Oddly he made little attempt to make love to her, a thing for which she was thankful. But when he began to talk of the arrival of the padre, she trembled. Time enough for love-making after the padre had gone. Time enough—all the rest of life!

In the far places, with this strange, this alien man beside her, how often she would think of Fred and the—

Celie turned and buried her head in her arms, clenched her teeth upon the sobs that shook her. How she ached for the good dependable feel of Fred's arm about her in that moment.

Amores, at the one narrow window, gave a little exclamation under his breath, and Celie lifted her wet eyes. Then she crossed to him and peered over his shoulder. A rider was approaching over the snake-like trail that wound down the hill. And such a rider! As he drew close, Celie receded from the window and sat cowering upon the tumbled blankets of a bunk.

Dark and evil, he had seemed to leer at her out of the dust that enveloped him. His clothes were a queer mixture of uniform and riding apparel. A dirty bright wrapping of silk was about his middle. A fresh scar, purple laced with scarlet, formed a wide welt across his face.

"Manuelito!" he hailed Amores.

"Thomaso!" Amores greeted him with amazement. "Where are the others?"

Scornfully the rider spat and dismounted, clumping to the door of the hut.

"Ah, such stupidity! Such pigeon blood! Colored water they have in their veins. As we depart from the town of Galina, we are set upon by government troops—the women are taken from us to be returned to their clucking parents—and the men of Strano, the bandit—they surrender—all but Thomaso!" He struck himself upon the breast. "I alone ride to attend the bridal feast! And then—in a crotch of the hills—behold, I come upon the padre, fallen from his animal with a broken leg! So there will be no wedding! But I shall have the feast—and you the bride—in spite of accident!"

This terrorizing conversation taking place just outside the door in swift and fluent Spanish filled Celie with dread. If only she hadn't understood the language—and yet she was glad she did. It was best to be prepared. Breathlessly she waited for Amores's answer to the man Thomaso.

"You shall have your feast if you care to sup in the open. The hut belongs to my bride and me!"

A loud guffaw met this response, and the evil faced, smirking Thomaso waited while Amores reëntered the hut, took food from a great hamper, and wine in a straw-covered bottle.

"What need for food when one has love?" Thomaso shrugged and dug Amores slyly in the ribs with a ragged elbow. "Honey from the lips of thy delight—eh, Amores? Thou shalt not be empty!"

He swaggered away with his burden to the shade of a tree as Amores entered the hut again and closed the thick door behind him. Crossing to the white faced girl, he fell upon his knees beside her and set his lips against her cheek.

"My dove! My white one! *Santa Blanca!*" He ran his dark fingers through her red gold hair caressingly.

Celie stood it as long as she could, then struck at him with blind fury. Oh, for the safe arms of Fred. Oh, for his dear, clumsy fondling. This creature with his expert gestures, his silken touch that was somehow like the touch of some slimy, crawling thing! Garish, his scarlet sash seemed now. And there was a slim gold earring in one ear! Why had she never noticed it before? Bedizened, like a gypsy! What a man to live with all one's life.

WITH a catlike movement and a little shrug, Amores turned away. "That can wait! Amores is hungry. As there is to be no wedding, and no wedding feast, we shall eat now!" He took the hamper, and from it drew strange foods and breadstuffs, more wine in straw-covered bottles which he ranged upon the bare scarred table.

"You ate only a little while ago," Celie reminded him.

Amores laughed, deep in his throat. "That is almost like telling a man: 'You kissed a little while ago!' One kiss—one meal—meager fare for a man of my capacities!"

Mockingly he placed a bench for her at the table. Still mocking, he poured wine for her and for himself and held his drink aloft:

"To the happiness of my bride in the sight of Heaven—since it has not pleased the saints to send the padre!"

White lipped, Celie stared at him as

he gulped the wine and wiped his handsome mouth with his sleeve. Paying no attention to her, he sat down and grasped his meat in his fingers, tearing at it with his teeth like an animal—making guzzling sounds in his throat as he swallowed. She closed her eyes against the spectacle.

A grande! A don! Juana should see him now, devouring his food like any peon.

When the business of the meal was over, he cleared the table by the simple expedient of brushing it all back into the hamper and slamming down the lid. Then he approached Celie again. This time there was no opportunity for her to strike him. He held her arms pinioned at her sides while he kissed her and kissed her again.

But if her arms were pinioned, Celie was not muzzled. She set her sharp little teeth into his dark wrist, and with a cry of rage he flung her from him. But only to gather her close again, rain more kisses over her face and neck, as she struggled and writhed in his arms.

"Ah!" He held her off from him and beamed. "Ah! Such a little tigress! Bite me! Strike me again! Strano likes that! Spirit is to be desired! It lends the zest! It is the bitter that makes sweeter the sweet!"

But when she bit at his cheek, his hands clamped tight upon her shoulders and he shook her till she was nearly breathless. "Never you fear that Strano will not tame you! A wife of spirit, yes! But no vixen! No sharp toothed serpent!" He threw her onto the bunk and rushed out, banging the door behind him.

Celie shivered with terror. Had he gone for Thomaso, his colleague in heaven knew what crimes, to bring him back to aid in the business of taming her?

Frantically she went to the window, only to see Thomaso asleep beneath his tree. Amores was not in sight.

And then Celie closed her lips upon a cry. Far off on the trail it seemed to her that she discerned a cloud of dust! Another rider? Or—Fred? She strained her eyes only to see the dust fade, dissolve into nothing. Only the bare trail confronted her. Wearily she sank down and rested her head against the sill, giving herself up to hopeless tears.

Of course Fred would not come. Naturally he would think she had gone off with Amores of her own accord! The sun began to slant between the hills. St. Valentine's—the day that had always been hers and Fred's, was drawing to a close. What had been always before a day of happiness had become a day of horror! Soon the sun would be setting, and then the swift night would swoop down like a dark bird—

"THE dawn—it was bright over land and sea—I called to my love—"

Gay, tender, cajoling, Amores's voice drifted into her from beneath the window. The tinkle of his guitar accompanied it. Verse after verse he sang—then silence. Then he was in the room again, kissing her savagely, calling her dove and tigress, threatening to tame her.

Then he was beneath the window again, singing "La Paloma." The song that once had thrilled her. How mockingly it fell upon her ears now! She tried to close them to the hateful sound, and there was Amores beside her, staring over her head through the window. His hands upon her shoulder grew suddenly limp. He stepped back a space and commanded her suddenly,

"Señorita—look at me." Celie had risen and half turned to the window. "Look at me!" The repeated command brought her eyes to his face and then he bowed deeply, smiled into her tear-wet eyes. There was ironic laughter behind that smile. Whimsically his lips curved and he shrugged his shoulders and made a wide gesture, almost theatric.

"You are—*muy valiente!* Of such bravery! I love you! I, Manuelito Strano Amores, the bandit. I love you! But I know now that you do not love me! Therefore I, too, am to be *muy valiente—*"

A cry from Thomaso cut through his speech—something about a horse and hurry. The "*muy pronto!*" came through the still air like a bullet.

And then Amores was going on:

"I, too, can be gallant. I—Manuelito Strano Amores—I give you back to your gringo lover—the one with the yellow hair!"

With a sudden movement he bowed himself straight out of the hut through a back door that Celie had not noted before.

She stared after him, petrified. Amores was gone. The menace of him was removed, there was no doubt of that. She heard their horses' hooves muffled in the dust of the trail that led over a farther range of hills at the back of the hut—his and Thomaso's.

But she was alone—in this isolated cabin in the wild hills. A little food in the hamper—wine—then what? No one would ever find her here.

Around and around her thoughts flew! How still it was! And yet it was not still. That distant sound—hoof beats! Amores was coming back! That gesture of renunciation—his cruel joke before he should bring the man Thomaso in to tame her!

Frantically Celie rushed from the cabin. She might lose herself in the hills, die of hunger and exposure, but she would not stay there, trapped like an animal. She sprang forward blindly—caught her foot against some obstacle, fell—

WHEN she opened her eyes it was nearly dark and she was in the cabin again, in a man's arms. Fearfully she looked up—into Fred's steady blue gaze.

"Poor kid! Poor little kid! Fred's here. Everything's all right now!"

He kissed her awkwardly beneath one ear.

There were others in the room, government troops, Fred explained to her as she stared at their dark faces, after Strano, the bandit.

Suddenly Celie began to laugh. Fred thought she was hysterical and tried to soothe her, but Celie only laughed harder.

"Oh, that Amores! Oh, Fred, you should have seen him, standing there by the door— He loved me—but he saw that I did not love him—so he was giving me back to my gringo lover! Oh! Oh!" She laughed till the tears came. "What a poser he was. What he probably saw that made him change his mind about me so quickly was—that you were coming—with the government troops! He just had to make a graceful exit! 'I give you back to your gringo lover'!"

"And—did he, Cele? Would you let me—have you back?" Fred was whispering to her now.

Celie shook her head in pretended denial. Then she bent forward, her lips against his ear:

"But if you give me that little house you built and a wedding ring, you can be my Valentine!"

Afraid to Love

"You can't do this terrible thing," Allan told Ellen. But she said "Yes" to elderly James. Why? Because she was afraid of love!

By Peggy Gaddis

Author of "Wedded Strangers," etc.

THE sun had set, and the sky in the west blazed red. A cold, biting wind swept through the leafless branches of the old trees about the house and as Ellen hurried along, huddled in her warm coat, her head bent against the wind, she thought longingly of the fire that Prudence would have waiting for her.

Yet, despite the cold wind and the penetrating chill of the mid-winter evening, she paused a moment at the gate. A gaunt, weather-beaten, two-storied house, set in the midst of a grove of fine old elms was before her. The leafless branches of syringia bushes scraped the walls; beside the gate two huge lilac trees bent against the wind.

Gaunt and cold, dreary and gloomy as the scene might be, Ellen looked at it with the eyes of love, seeing instead the way it looked in spring — crocus thrusting bright, impudent heads above emerald grass, tulips and daffodils and hyacinths bordering the neat walk from the gate to the steps, and the lilac trees bent beneath the weight of great fragrant lavender and white clusters of bloom.

It hurt her to think that to-morrow

He tried to explain, but the white-faced girl was too shaken to listen

she must leave this place that was the only home she had ever known, and go south to an uncle and aunt whom she had never seen.

She had lived so long in this gaunt old house with Uncle Phineas that it was almost impossible to contemplate any other home, or mode of living. Uncle Phineas, gaunt and gloomy as his old house, asking nothing of her save that she see that his meals were served on time and composed of the dishes he liked best; his house kept clean and neat; and that, for the rest, she stay out of his way. She had known a mild affection for Uncle Phineas—he would have hated any other kind. And now that he was dead she grieved for him—but not with the desolate, heart-wrenching grief with which one's soul is tortured when the departed is the adored.

She admitted, honestly, that her terror of going South to her uncle and aunt was far deeper than her quite honest grief for Uncle Phineas. She was almost painfully shy, because she had had scant opportunity of meeting strangers. And now she dreaded that as an ordeal. She was like a plant that sets its roots firmly into its native soil, and, when transplanted, withers and refuses to thrive.

AS Ellen stepped from the train in the Florida town three days later, she blinked, blinded by the brilliant sunlight. She had left the little New England village of her birth blanketed in snow, lashed by a cruelly cold wind, leafless trees standing stark and grim against a lowering, sullen gray sky; yet here were dazzling sunlight, blue skies, luxuriant foliage, green grass, and flowers so huge and so brilliantly colored that they startled Ellen.

Almost before she had stepped upon

the platform, she was enveloped in a bear-hug. A man's booming voice rang out:

"Well, well, Mother, here she is—little Ellen! Welcome, child, welcome home!"

"Roger, you're scaring the child to death!" cautioned a woman's comfortable voice, and Ellen was drawn into a motherly embrace. "You poor motherless little thing! We're so glad to have you with us, my dear!"

She had a chance to see her uncle, a stout, powerful looking man with a face sun-tanned to the color of leather, twinkling gray eyes that reminded her faintly of Uncle Phineas's eyes, and dressed in spotless white, with a broad panama hat shading his face. Aunt Marcia was a stout, motherly soul, immaculately dressed in white like her husband, but hatless, though she carried a Chinese sunshade.

There was a whoop of youthful voices and half a dozen young people plunged across the platform, breathless with laughter, hilarious, almost frightening to the tired, already homesick Ellen.

"Mother, will you speak to this good-for-nothing son of yours? He *wouldn't* let me drive, and then he got in behind a darky driving a flea-bitten old horse and wouldn't even try to pass him—so of course we're late!" announced a pretty, sun-burned girl in pink, laughing as though she offered a huge joke.

"This is Ellen, of course! Gosh, I'm glad to see you, Ellen! We're going to have some spiffy times!" the pretty girl in pink greeted Ellen without waiting for an introduction. She embraced and kissed her heartily.

Ellen was unaccustomed to demonstrative outbursts—she had never met more than one or two strangers at a time—and she was tired to the very bone, with the long, unaccustomed journey. So she could only manage a little murmur that was inarticulate in reply and the pretty girl in pink drew back, a little resentful of the way her enthusiastic welcome had been received by her new cousin.

"Ellen, this is Molly, your cousin!" said Aunt Marcia, affectionately. "A scatter-brain if ever there was one. And this is Nick, my oldest son, and Patty, Molly's kid sister—don't frown at Mother like that, precious! And this is Ted, my youngest boy—and Allan, who is—"

"Just a stray whom the Newcombs have taken in and given a home, and an occasional bone to gnaw on!" interrupted the young man to whom she referred, as he thrust out his hand for Ellen's. Welcome to our city, Ellen—you'll have a whopping good time, I know. I have, and I've been here so many years I'm ashamed to count 'em! I'm one of those birds invited for a week-end who stay six months to six years!"

"Don't pay any attention to him, Ellen; we're quite sure he's some sort of a relative, but none of us have taken time to figure out just what degree!" cut in Molly, gayly. "Come along, you're going to ride home with us—we've got the roadster! Of course, Mom and Dad are in the family hearse!"

Ellen blinked a little at all this noise and chatter and breathless laughter that seemed to flow about her like a whirlpool. She felt shy, homesick, forlorn.

"Perhaps Ellen would rather ride with us, Molly—I'm sure the roadster is already overloaded! Six of you in it!" chided Aunt Marcia, comfortably.

"Please—I would—if you don't

mind!" stammered Ellen, speaking for the first time, and almost cowering against her aunt.

Uncle Roger shot her a swift glance and the six young people stared for a moment. They were too polite, too well-bred to make any comment. But as Ellen went away between her uncle and her aunt, she heard Patty's clear treble.

"—gosh, what an awful *stick!*" and Ellen's ears burned, for she knew only too well that Patty was referring to the new arrival.

IN the next few days, Ellen went through an agony of embarrassment and shyness, homesickness that can only be understood when one considers her up-bringing. Living alone with Uncle Phineas and the elderly Prudence, hers had been a lonely, secluded life. There had been books in Uncle Phineas's library—"Little Women," "David Copperfield," "Ivanhoe," the Elsie books, a few of Mary J. Holmes's novels, but nothing more modern. She had filled her lonely days with these books, and with the beautiful and intricate needlework that Prudence had taught her.

Ellen had not realized that she was lonely. Never having known any other life, there had been nothing for her to miss and she had been quite content. She had grown into a prim, sedate, old-fashioned little thing who, at eighteen, had now been flung bodily into the happy-go-lucky, harum-scarum daily life of the Roger Newcombs. A family that shouted with mirth over things that struck Ellen as not at all funny; a family with passionate likes and dislikes; thoroughly modern, thoroughly content.

They were not wealthy, but had plenty for comfortable living.

The house was a big, rambling, stucco thing built in Spanish style. It was set in the midst of five acres of beautifully landscaped grounds. At one side there was a twenty acre grove of seven-year-old orange trees, and other groves were scattered about where the soil was best adapted to them—grapefruit, tangerine, kumquat, guavas. Towering cypress trees, draped with Spanish moss; thick-growing, luxuriant shrubbery, undergrowth, queer, exotic, tropic things that were so strange as to be fearsome to the girl born and bred among the elms and maples, the rolling hills and valleys of New England.

She had been given a room at the back of the house, with two wide, casement windows that looked directly out upon an untouched jungle. She stood sometimes during those first few days of painful adjustment, looking into that tangled wilderness of lush green, and shuddered. There had been a night when she had looked from her darkened room into the jungle, and two round balls of fire had glared up at her. She had screamed with terror—and the others had shouted with mirth when they discovered that she had been frightened by the kitten-sized young "bob-cat" who was stalking the garbage can, down back of the garage.

She tried conscientiously to fling herself into the life about her. Uncle Roger and Aunt Marcia were pleasant and friendly to her, affectionately eager to win her to happiness; the young people tried to draw her into their own affairs. But though she donned dainty, charming party frocks and wraps provided by Aunt Marcia, and dashed about the country with the young people, danced, played tennis, and tried to learn to play golf, she was never a part of all this. She was aloof, lonely, a

little afraid—but so shy that the others had no way of getting near her.

ONE afternoon she was in the patio with Allan, who was never very far away. She had learned now that Allan was Allan Richards, the orphaned son of a former business partner of Uncle Rogers's, who had been taken into the household very much as Ellen had. That Allan was very deeply attracted to Ellen the rest of the household had already discovered, and though Molly grimaced a little at the discovery, she was too sporting to try to regain Allan for herself.

The sun was setting, and soon the family would emerge, refreshed by the afternoon siesta that was an established custom to which Ellen could never accustom herself. The golden light lay long on the velvety grass of the patio, and there was no sound save the tinkle of the fountain where gold-fish, that weighed a pound or more each, swam lazily.

Ellen in a filmy white frock sat in a deep canvas chair and Allan sat facing her on one of the stone benches that dotted the patio. Ellen was a little uncomfortable beneath his steady, warm regard, and she turned her head away.

Suddenly she caught her breath, her eyes widened, and every vestige of color left her face. She was sick with fear of the thing facing her.

"Ellen!" cried Allan sharply, springing to his feet and bending over her. "What's the matter? What is it?"

Wordless, she indicated the thing that held her terrified regard. But for its enormous size and coloring she would have known it for a grasshopper. It sat perched on the rim of the fountain within two feet of her, and it was almost as large as her small fist. Its coloring was superb—soft green and tans and cream and rose, like a jewel. Its round, grotesque eyes were fixed on Ellen in an unwinking, baleful stare.

Allan laughed.

"It's only a grasshopper, child—why, I thought you had seen a rattlesnake at the very least!" he tried to tease her, but she sprang up, suddenly, white-faced, tense, shaking.

"Oh, I can't bear it! I hate this place! I hate it! Nothing's sane or normal or like—real life!" she panted, on the verge of hysteria. "Grasshoppers so huge they are like nightmares—ants so big that they look as if they were cut out of red and black velvet and you can *hear* them when they walk across paper—roaches as big as my fist that *fly—birds* that *croak* instead of sing—Oh—I want to go home!"

She was shaking with hysteria, and her two small hands were twisted tightly together. Her eyes, as she raised them to Allan's, were filled with tears, wide with horror and hatred.

"Oh, but, Ellen darling—that's foolish—you mustn't say that! Don't you think all this is beautiful? Look at the flowers—the grass—the green trees—the sunshine—and think that up North everything is covered feet deep in snow, and there are cold winds blowing—" he tried to reason with her.

"Look!" she cried sharply.

She pointed to the rim of the fountain, where a tiny lizard-like thing scampered along, his slim body as tawny as the stone against which he crawled. He dropped with a perceptible "plop" to the grass, where, even as they watched, his body turned a bright green. A low-growing scarlet hibiscus blossom attracted him, and he sped to it. As Ellen saw the scarlet begin to creep over his body, she covered her eyes and turned away, shuddering. Allan's arms went about her.

"Why, you silly child! It's only a chameleon — the most harmless little fellow in the world! He's like—like—a living jewel! Beautiful—" He soothed her.

"Beautiful! Ugh! I hate the little crawling things!" she cried, shuddering, and tore herself from his arms, running into the house.

ALLAN sat on alone in the patio for a long moment, puzzled. All this beauty, glowing, tropical, delightful—and it frightened and repelled the girl he loved. He couldn't understand it, though he tried honestly. Of course, he had been born and bred here beneath the fierce hot Florida sun. He loved the land, because it was his own. He had made trips North—but had always come home, gladly. That anybody could prefer the scrabby, rocky, hilly land of New England to this lush, productive, beautiful place was unthinkable.

Yet it was all too evident that Ellen did.

Molly, fresh and glowing from her siesta and cold shower, in a fresh daffodil yellow frock, appeared and grinned at him.

"Where's the girl friend, Al? Can't imagine you missing an afternoon siesta, except to sit and chatter with the New England school-ma'rm!" she chaffed him, and then colored hotly beneath her sun-burned skin. "Sorry—I shouldn't have said that! I'd give my right arm if I could understand that girl! She's as unhappy as the deuce—I only met Uncle Phineas once, but I swear I can't remember him as anything that a girl would spoil her beauty grieving over. He was a nice little duck, of course—but good gosh, so're you! You ought to be able to make up for him!"

But Allan refused to rally to her teasing.

IT was the following day that Uncle Roger brought a guest for a week's stay. A business associate down from New York, with whom he wished to discuss a number of business problems. James Stewart, a man of about forty, rather tall and spare, with a thin, high-bred face and rapidly thinning gray hair. Molly and Patty dismissed him at first glance as "dull as ditchwater." Ellen paid no attention to him until, at dinner the first night, he spoke to her over the soup.

"Your uncle tells me you've just come down from New England, Miss Ellen. I'm a New Englander myself. What part of it do you claim?"

Ellen mentioned the little village, and Mr. Stewart's pale eyes lighted.

"So? Why, that's not fifty miles from my home town!" he told her.

Across the table, Allan watched Ellen's face light up—the warm color in her cheeks, eyes glowing like stars—and his heart contracted with bitter jealousy. He had never been able to make her look at him like that. He heard their eager chatter, saw Mr. James's pleased smile, heard Ellen laugh once or twice and looked down the table to see Uncle Roger looking as much surprised as Allan felt.

From that moment on James Stewart became Ellen's shadow, and Ellen seemed only too happy to have it so. They chattered endlessly of New England—of maple-sugar time, of autumn afternoons, crisp and cold, the woods filled with luscious nuts to be had for the gathering — of spring, with her glory of trailing arbutus — of woods and fields greening to new life, home-gardens burgeoning with daffodils, and hyacinths, tulips and crocus.

In planning her amusements for herself and her crowd, Molly discovered that she must include Mr. Stewart, because otherwise Ellen wouldn't go. So on a Saturday afternoon soon after the New Year, when her guests assembled for a hunt, James and Ellen were of the party. Ellen had asked Molly the object of their hunt, and Molly had answered carelessly, "Snakes." Ellen had felt quite sure that there was some obscure joke, and she had been unwilling to be laughed at, so she had asked no more questions.

There were three cars filled with young people, hilarious over nothing in the world save that it was a gloriously mild day, with a cool wind and cloudless blue sky. Shouting to each other, each car racing the other. Crowded in the back seat, beside James Stewart, Ellen was more content than she had been since her arrival in Florida. She was no longer utterly forlorn—there was someone here who spoke her own language, someone who knew and loved the quaint little New England town that she loved.

The cars came at last to a stretch of scrub-palmetto. In the distance a rim of pines seemed to bind the barren territory. A road of sorts led from the paved highway and half a mile down this road the cars parked. Ahead of them was a station-wagon filled with six or eight strapping young negro men, waiting for "de white folks," grinning in sympathy with the hilarious laughter of the young people.

Molly gave a signal for which the negroes had apparently been waiting, and they scattered—moving off across the palmettoes in a fan-shaped wedge, very cautious.

Molly's guests armed themselves with the rifles in the cars and waited.

Suddenly in the distance a little spurt of flame leaped up, spreading rapidly through the palmettoes. Another fire, and another—until the palmettoes blazed in a half-circle, the opening being where the cars were parked.

Ellen saw that the guests were all eagerly watching the road ahead, and, without understanding why, she too watched. Suddenly, full into the road ahead of her slid a huge snake. Writhing, he looked like a thick black liquid being poured across the road.

There was the crack of a rifle—the snake twitched and lay still.

"Got him!" shouted someone, exultantly. "Look, there's another!"

TO Ellen, huddled in the car watching that white road ahead, it seemed to come horribly alive—a mass of twisting, writhing ropelike things, mad with terror, fleeing from the ancient enemy, fire, directly into the path of sudden death at the muzzles of those rifles that cracked now like the

popping of firecrackers. She covered her face with her hands and shrank into the car-seat, sick and shaking. She was hardly conscious of it when the door opened hurriedly and slammed again. She heard James Stewart's sympathetic, disturbed voice.

"You poor child! What a hideous experience for you! I never dreamed—not for anything in the world would I have let you in for it!" he told her.

Somehow she was in his arms, her face hidden against his shoulder, her fingers stuffed into her ears, trying to shut out the constant crackling of those rifles.

After what seemed to Ellen hours of agony, the cars were in motion once more and they were back at the house. As she got dizzily out of the car, Allan was beside her.

"I got several beauties, Ellen. I'm going to have them made into slippers and a bag to match for you! Rattlers—diamond backs—beauties!" he told her like an eager boy.

Ellen gave him a glance of horror and fled to the house. Stewart met Allan's angry, bewildered gaze with cold eyes.

"Afraid this afternoon was a little too much for Miss Ellen! Had I guessed what the object of this hunt was, I would never have permitted her to attend!" he said quietly to the younger man.

Allan was so surprised by Stewart's assumption that he could control Ellen's action, that he stood and stared, while Stewart went on to the house.

Into the moonlight stole a man— Allan!

THAT night after dinner Stewart drew Ellen into the sun-parlor. Not the patio, for it was chilly there, and the night air was bad for his throat. And quite simply he asked her to marry him.

He admitted the difference in their ages, but hoped that it might be offset by the fact that the same country had

bred them, and that he would take her back to the home she loved.

Ellen heard herself accepting him.

And a few minutes later, in the living-room, she heard Stewart formally asking Uncle Roger for his consent to the marriage.

Aghast, striving to be polite, Uncle Roger hesitated. But when Ellen assured him, coolly but docilely, that she loved James and wished to marry him, there was nothing more that he could say than to offer his formal consent. His eyes, however, added that he could not offer his approval of the match.

Ellen was conscious of Allan's blazing, incredulous eyes—of his face suddenly pale beneath the sun-tan. She would not meet his eyes.

But a little later Allan faced her in the patio. She had slipped out for a moment of solitude beneath the warm moon, the cool air fragrant with the scent of orange blossoms, and the myriad flowers about the place.

Startled when she heard Allan's footsteps, she turned to flee, but Allan blocked her path. His face was white and set, his eyes grim.

"Oh, no, you don't!" he interrupted her flight. "You're going to stay right here and listen to me. I've got something to say to you!"

"I—can't imagine—you can't have anything — well, what is it?" stammered Ellen, retreating before him.

They stood now beside the fountain, with the wall of the patio, laced with the blossoming beauty of the star-jessamine vine, behind them. Ellen's slim, dainty figure in its soft white frock was outlined against that dark wall, and the moonlight shone full on her lovely, half-frightened little face.

"Ellen—oh, my dear, you can't mean to do this terrible thing!" burst violently from Allan.

"What terrible thing?"

"Marry a man old enough to be your father!" Allan's frankness was brutal. "Why, Ellen, you're only a baby—not nineteen yet—and he's past forty! It's ridiculous, it's—indecent! I won't stand for it!"

Ellen controlled the trembling that threatened her, and managed to say, coldly:

"I can't see what business it is of yours!"

Allan was angry at that, and she caught the dark flash of his eyes.

"Oh—you can't, eh? Well, I'll just show you what business it is of mine!" he snapped. "It's my business because I love you, and because I intend to marry you! And because I don't intend to allow any darned old moss-back like Stewart to take you away from me! Do you hear me?"

"Don't!" gasped Ellen, flinging up small ineffectual hands to push him away as he moved swiftly and caught her in his arms.

"Don't fight me, darling — don't! For God's sake, don't!" pleaded Allan, hotly. "I've loved you since first I set eyes on you! I've meant, from that first minute that you came here to live, to marry you—when you were grown up enough. But you seemed such a child—so small and frightened—oh, I love you so! Darling—darling! Look at me! Tell me that you love me too!"

Ellen was trembling in his embrace, and but for his arms about her, would have fallen. There was something in her heart that was utterly new—utterly foreign—something that frightened her by reason of its warmth and sweetness. It was as though her heart had been a tightly folded bud, and Allan's love, his arms about her, were a warm sun that caused that tightly folded little bud to stir—to loosen its petals.

She quivered and Allan bent his head, tipping her own back until it lay, blossom-white, against his shoulder.

With a little caught breath he set his mouth on hers—on that warm little pink mouth that was like a cool, fragrant pink rose. The touch of her mouth sent a delicious madness rioting through his veins and he held her so close that she could scarcely breathe, murmuring her name, little endearments, over and over in her ears.

SUDDENLY he became conscious that she was crying. His lips against her cheek tasted the faint salt of her tears. He heard her breath come in little sobbing gasps, her slim body held close in his arms shook with sobs. Stricken, he released her, feeling himself seventeen different kinds of a brute.

"Ellen — oh, my dearest — don't—*please*—you're breaking my heart!" he pleaded, unhappily.

But the moment he released her she sped past him and flew to her own room. She had to be alone with this new, terrifying thing that had been born in her heart beneath the blazing ardor of Allan's kiss.

She didn't turn on the lights. She wanted the cool fragrant darkness. Felt that she could not face the reflection of herself, newborn from Allan's kiss, in the mirror of her dressing table.

She knelt beside the window, looking out into the jungle. The long draperies of Spanish moss waved mysteriously in the breeze, ghostly in the moonlight. The jungle teemed with life—insects of incredible size and quantity. Snakes, too—hundreds of them. She shivered at the thought—and caught her breath as something white rose out of the jungle and winged its silent way out of sight. A snowy heron, the moonlight turning it to silver glory. Was the noiseless flight of the heron a symbol of the beauty that can spring from dark, fearsome places like the jungle

Ellen went to bed at last with that thought in her mind.

FOR a day or two she avoided Allan, refused to be alone with him. Her wedding day had been set, and Aunt Marcia plunged into preparations for the event. Her generous heart went out to this shy, repressed, lonely girl, and she wanted to make up, in every way that she could, for the poverty and bleakness of her life.

But her heart misgave her as she watched Ellen and James together. She felt that she was doing a wicked thing to allow this wedding to go on—yet Ellen had assured her, steadily, that she wanted to marry James.

When finally Allan managed to corner Ellen, he faced her, miserable, at the foot of the stairway just before the others came down to dinner.

"See here, Ellen! You're not going through with this—this hellish thing!" he told her hotly.

Because her heart beat more swiftly at sight of him, and because her knees trembled beneath her, Ellen faced him coldly.

"If you are referring to my marriage—I see no reason why I should alter my plans!" Her heart was thudding against her ribs in a most disturbing way.

"No reason? Good Lord, Ellen—are you human or a woman of stone?" groaned her lover. "I adore you, and I know you could care for me if you'd let yourself, yet you're flinging yourself headlong into a fool marriage with a man old enough to be your father! Why? Tell me that!"

"Because he and I understand each

other—because we both like the same things—and because—I—I—hate it—down here!" said Ellen, steadily, fiercely.

"But if that's all—good Heavens, Ellen, I'll take you away from here—any place you want to go!" And Allan would have taken her in his arms, but Ellen shrank from him. There was real fear in her eyes and he stopped as though she had struck him.

"Ellen—are you—*afraid* of me?" he gasped, as though the very thought was unbearable.

"Yes!" said Ellen, little spots of color glowing suddenly against her usually pale cheeks. "Yes, I'm afraid of you! Terribly afraid of you!"

Allan drew back.

"I'm—I'm—sorry! Lord! That's a body-blow! I never *dreamed* that you felt like that. I'll never bother you again, Ellen. You may be quite sure of that!" he muttered, and turned on his heel, went out of the house and into the moonlight.

Ellen almost called him back. He had misunderstood her—but how could she expect him to understand her when she couldn't understand herself. After a moment she dropped her hand to her side and went on into the living-room.

A WEEK passed. Another. It was only six days now until the date set for Ellen's and James's marriage. Upstairs in the lovely old Italian chest in Ellen's room there were piles of exquisite things—lingerie delicately colored as apple-blossoms; fine linens for the new home that would be in her beloved New England. The closet in one of the spare rooms was filling with beautiful gowns turned out by the three sewing women that Aunt Marcia had engaged. There had been several trips to Palm Beach, where the finest New York shops maintained Southern headquarters during the season. Aunt Marcia was determined that Ellen, who had never had more than one new dress at a time in her whole life, should have a trousseau the equal of anything that Molly herself would have had.

Molly had long ago given up any hope of understanding her cousin. The two girls might have spoken a different language.

One morning a little less than a week before the wedding date, the four men, Uncle Roger, James, Allan, and Ted, who insisted upon being listed as a "man" for all his scant sixteen years—departed on a hunting trip that would last two or three days. Aunt Marcia insisted that she was glad to have them all out of the house, for a little while—they were continually underfoot, anyway!

Ellen was startled to find that she was almost relieved at James's absence, and, most alarming of all, that she missed Allan! That thought frightened her, and she tried to push it as far back into her consciousness as possible.

The days passed quietly. One. Two. And then the afternoon when the men were due back from the hunting trip.

Ellen was in her room when she heard the noise of their arrival. She sprang up, flushed, eager, bright-eyed. She tried to tell herself that it was because James had returned—but knew that she lied.

As she came out of her room into the corridor she heard a hubub of voices downstairs. Something had happened. She paused, afraid to go down for fear of what she would learn. Then Aunt Marcia's voice, fraught with tears, floated up to her.

"Oh, my God—Allan—dead! I simply can't believe it! An accident —

tripped over his gun! How on *earth* are we going to tell Ellen? I simply can't—I can't, I tell you!"

SHE stood quite still. All about her she seemed to hear a loud crashing —a roaring filled her ears. Blindly, stumbling, groping her way, she turned back to her own room and closed the door behind her. She crept across the room to the window that looked out over the patio and crouched there, while wave after wave of blinding agony rolled over her.

Allan was—dead!

And now, in the bitter agony of her grief, she knew the truth. She loved Allan. She belonged to him. It had taken the awful blow of his death to knock the scales from her eyes.

She had been a silly, blind creature, afraid of the bigness, of the glory and the majesty of love. She had cowered in the dark, clinging to James, believing that marriage to him would save her from the love that slept in her heart for Allan, and that had been awakened by his kiss.

She beat her soft fists against the woodwork of the window-seat until the delicate flesh was bruised and throbbing. She rocked her slim body from side to side in a paroxysm of grief too sharp, too bitter for the blessed relief of tears.

Allan was dead! Allan was dead! Her heart cried out at each repetition —mad with pain. She had never known that such an abasement of grief could be possible—

Out of the blackness she heard Aunt Marcia at the door. She came into the room, her face white and ravaged, her eyes dark with pain.

"My darling—I have some dreadful news—" she began, but Ellen put up her hand, stiffly.

"I know. I heard you—I was in the hall when they came!" she said dryly, stiffly.

Aunt Marcia's kind face crumpled, and there were tears in her eyes.

"Ellen, dearest—we're all so—terribly sorry for you!" she began, but Ellen forced a tiny, pallid smile.

"I know—and thank you! You see —I loved him, I didn't know it until now—and now it's too late!" she said softly. "I'd—please, I'd like to be alone, if you don't mind!"

Aunt Marcia looked at her through brimming tears, and went softly out of the room.

Ellen faced the patio. Darkness had fallen and the moon was rising. Out there she had been held close in Allan's arms—there she had felt his kiss that had so startled her that she had tried to deny her love for him! She could have shrieked aloud.

She had tried to deny that she loved him—had planned to marry James because she was afraid of the emotion that poured over her at Allan's touch on her hand. Afraid to trust her own normal instincts! She had lived so long in her little repressed shell that she was afraid to step out of it into the world of love that Allan offered.

Suddenly, she sat erect and her fingers clenched on the window-sill. A man had come out of the house, and was pacing up and down. A man who was young and tall and stalwart. A man who looked terribly like Allan!

Yet Allan was — dead! She clung there to the window-sill, trembling like a leaf, her wide, haunted eyes staring down at that pacing figure. Was it Allan's ghost come back to torment her?

He paused in his pacing, and looked up at her window. She saw the moonlight full on his face—Allan's face!

With a gasping cry she struggled to her feet and groped for the door. She must know—the man in the patio—Allan? But she had heard them say Allan was dead?

Down the stairs, out to the patio. And then she was facing Allan. She swayed and Allan put out his hand, catching her arm, supporting her—and she knew that he was quite, quite real. There had been some mistake—Allan was alive, standing here before her.

The sound of her cry had brought the family from the living-room. Ellen, clinging to Allan's hand as though to reassure herself that he was real, turned to face them, almost accusingly.

"I thought—when you came to my room, Aunt Marcia—who is—dead? I thought it was—Allan!"

Aunt Marcia put an arm about her, but Ellen clung to Allan's hand.

"No, dear—it is—James!" she said, very gently. "I tried to tell you, but you said you had heard. It was an accident—he tripped over his gun and the gun was discharged. He was dead when Allan got to him!"

Ellen closed her eyes as a shudder swept over her. But her hand still clung to Allan's, and the warm, strong pressure of his fingers gave her a measure of comfort.

She opened her eyes at last, and looked squarely up at him. For a moment he gazed at her, startled, incredulous, afraid to believe what he saw. And then a light of almost incredible happiness blazed in his eyes, and his fingers tightened about hers until the pain was exquisite. But not for anything in the world would she have had that pain lessened in one degree—

"I—see!" she stammered at last, and turned toward the stairs. As she went up, she turned once and looked back at Allan. Her eyes were brilliant, soft, and the smile that touched the corners of her mouth was radiant. There was in her eyes a promise given to Allan—and in Allan's eyes a promise accepted, and a vow of love made clear.

James had been her friend. She had admired and respected him. Misled by that admiration and respect, she had come perilously close to marrying him. Her eyes had been opened. It had taken the death of the man whom she had admired and respected to reveal to her that it was Allan whom she loved.

She and Allan would pay their debt of respect to James's memory—but afterwards, Ellen knew as she went quietly up the stairs,—afterwards, she would enter into the Land of Heart's Desire, with Allan's arms about her and the touch of his mouth warm on hers.

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Barbara's lips curled disdainfully. How impudent he was!

A Knight Comes Riding

When Bab's pride was humbled into the dust and life seemed black indeed a true knight rode to her rescue on a very modern charger

By Eleanor Elliott Carroll

"A POUND of butter, one dozen eggs, the cereal, and—I believe that's about all, Mr. Enders. I'm taking them with me, please."

Barbara Waring dug down in her shabby hand bag and drew out a crumpled two-dollar note, her very last one. Wistfully she gazed toward the fruit stand. Those splendid grapes, the sunkist oranges. Mumsie ought to have orange juice, the doctor had said . . .

"Just in from California," insinuated the tradesman. "Take a dozen along, Miss Waring?"

She hesitated, rapidly calculating. By walking to work for the rest of the week she might afford this little delicacy for her invalid mother. "I'll take six oranges," she decided firmly. "Put

them in the basket and hold it till my brother comes. He'll be here any minute."

She opened the door and stepped outside, gazing anxiously up and down the gloomy street. Clouds banked darkly in the west, and a swirling wind cut sharply into her cheeks. A few flakes of snow fell. Where on earth was Andy?

Across the way a brilliant electric sign flared into life. A gaudy red, white and blue affair. The Peacock Club, it announced. Barbara stared at it resentfully. Like most of Morrisville's conservative inhabitants, she was indignant at this recent innovation in their quiet old town. It was a rendezvous for wild parties who motored down from the city every evening; and now the boys of the community, Andy included, were taking it up. They were all hand in glove with Darwin, the proprietor.

"Why, Miss Waring, what are you doing here?" spoke a voice beside her. "Looking for some one?"

She wheeled sharply, her cheeks flushing with annoyance. There stood the suave, well-dressed proprietor of the Peacock, the sleek-haired, black-eyed man she detested.

"I'm waiting for my brother," she answered stiffly, ignoring his extended hand. "He usually meets me here."

Ross Darwin smiled silkily.

"Oh, Andy and Dick Ware were at my place an hour ago. They went off together—I think they said they were headed for the city. If you'll wait just a moment I'll get my car and drive you home. I'd be glad to!"

Barbara's lips curled disdainfully. The colossal impudence of the man! Forcing himself on her. Calling her brother "Andy"!

"Thanks," she returned with chilling dignity, "I'd rather walk—for exercise. Good evening, Mr. Darwin."

Darwin's eyes narrowed with anger as he watched her slim, well-poised figure hasten inside the store. He saw the bright smile she gave the marketman as she caught up her basket, then he drew back into the vestibule of an adjoining building, his gaze following her down the street. It wasn't the first time Barbara Waring had snubbed him. The icy contempt in her tones always stung him like a lash.

"Pride and starvation don't go together, Bab Waring," he sneered under his breath. "High perch you're on, but you *might* take a tumble."

THE Warings were proud, even if it was an ever increasing problem as to how they would get their daily bread. The once lovely old home, on the outskirts of town, was nothing now but a wreck, mortgaged to its limit. It took the united efforts of both Barbara and Andy to keep it going, and to care for an invalid mother besides. A vast difference from their position of two years ago, before the death of their father and the discovery that their whole fortune had been swept away.

Hard for Andrew, at eighteen, to leave college and go to work as a road salesman for a wholesale house; hard for Bab, just one year older than her brother, to take a job as clerk in the town's one book store. But they had shouldered their burdens bravely, these two youngsters. The Warings still held their heads high.

The thought of Ross Darwin's presumption still rankled in Bab's mind as she hurried along. She must talk to Andy. It was all his fault. He was too friendly with the man. He had introduced him to her.

"Horrid creature," she murmured. "Reminds me of a well-fed toad. Actually offering to drive me home—"

"Who-ee! Hey, Bab!" shrieked a girl's high-pitched voice. "Wait a minute."

A long, low-slung roadster drew up to the curb ahead of her, and a slight, fur-clad figure leaned from the window. "Come right here," called the girl. "Got a surprise for you."

Bab's eyes brightened. Anne Richardson was her best friend; perhaps the only real one she possessed these lean days. She hastened to the car, but drew back in confusion as she spied the stranger behind the wheel. A big handsome young man, whose blue eyes twinkled back at her.

"Don't you know him?" giggled Anne, looking on in amusement. "Mean to say you've forgotten Kelcey?"

Kelcey Brentwood! The good-looking, fun-loving youth of twenty, who had visited his relatives, the Richardsons, five long years ago. She had been only fifteen then, and Anne a year younger. How he had teased and tormented the two high school girls!

"I thought you looked sort of familiar," Bab laughed. "You've not changed a particle, Kelcey."

His hand covered hers. Held it in a warm pressure while his gaze swept the small, heart-shaped face, with its big brown eyes and frame of auburn hair.

"Neither have you, Reddy," he grinned. "Remember how that name used to rile a certain person? But don't stand there in the snow. Coming down pretty lively now, isn't it? Hop right in. Squeeze over to the outside, Anne. I want Bab next to me."

"But this basket—" demurred Bab. "It 'll take up too much—"

"Give it to me," cut in Anne. "I'll hold it on my lap. Step over my feet and don't dare scratch these perfectly new pumps."

Bab pressed the other girl's arm as she slid into her place. Who but Anne, among all the well-to-do girls she knew, would cheerfully hold a market basket against a priceless mink coat?

"WHERE have you been all these years?" she asked, turning to Kelcey. "When did you get here? Did Anne expect you—"

"One at a time, please," laughed Kelcey, starting the engine. "First, I've been in Alaska, cruising around the shore, doing Geodetic work for the government. I got here just an hour ago. Drove over from Washington. Anne didn't expect me. Listen to this, Bab, it's killing: I wired her very mysteriously, asking for a blind date at Cross Road Tavern this afternoon, claiming I was a friend of her cousin, Kelcey Brentwood. Did she come? And how! You can imagine how she looked when she saw *me*."

"Poof!" Anne retorted grandly. "All the time I knew who it was—"

"Like fun you did. Anyway, it's great to be back in this little burg again, and with you two charming young ladies. The years haven't changed you, Bab. Same little pepper-pot you used to be?"

"No, she's not," cut in Anne, patting Bab's shoulder affectionately. "She has to be fairly dragged places these days. I scarcely ever see her—which reminds me, honey, that I'll have to throw a party to-night, in honor of Kelcey. You'll come, won't you? And bring Andy?"

"Of course she's coming," Kelcey said quickly, flashing a swift glance at

the girl beside him. A glance that took in the threadbare condition of her old coat, ungloved hands, shabby velvet tam. "Else I'll ditch the party and crash the Waring gates. I want to see Mrs. Waring anyway. Parties can wait, Anne. I'll be here two weeks, you know."

"*This* party can't wait," Anne stated decidedly. "Say you'll come, Babbie, darling. And *make* Andy bring you. He just won't do a darned thing I ask him to, of late," she added wistfully.

Bab laid her hand over Anne's, love and sympathy welling within her. Poor Andy's hopeless devotion to this friend of their better days was another cross she'd had to bear. "We will come, dear," she promised.

Then to Kelcey: "And you won't have to crash down our old gates, which, as you see, wouldn't take much of a push to fall."

She made an expressive gesture toward the dilapidated Waring house and grounds just ahead. The next moment they drew up before a high, ragged hedge, behind which could be seen the peaked roof of a big frame house in the last stages of decay.

Kelcey was out of the car and around on her side before she could open the door. He stood there in the falling snow, smiling down at her from his six feet of height. His teeth shone very white in a deeply tanned face, and when he doffed his hat the crisp blond hair was a startling surprise.

"Come early," he begged. "And if we dance, remember I'm to have my first look-in on that card of yours."

"Dance!" Anne cried. "Of course we'll dance. 'By, Babbie. Look for you and Andy in an hour or so."

Bab watched the car spin away, forgetful of the snowflakes that powdered her shoulders. Then went slowly inside.

Mrs. Waring, tiny, faded, frail, hovered over a low fire in the dining room, but looked up with a patient smile when the girl entered the room.

"You're late, dear," she said plaintively. "I didn't hear Andy come in. Where is he?"

"I don't know, Mumsie. He was with Dick Ware, I was told, and must have forgotten to stop for me. But Anne brought me home. Anne and—guess who? You couldn't if you tried. Kelcey Brentwood! Remember him?"

"Why, of course I do. Splendid boy. Why didn't he stop to see me, dear?"

"He's coming here—later. Tonight there's going to be a party at Anne's, and she wants us to come. But I—I don't know—"

"Oh, you must go, Barbara." There was genuine excitement in the childish eyes that were raised to the tall girl on the hearth rug. "Don't worry about me, honey. Martha will stay here. Did you bring chops for dinner?"

"Yes, and these gorgeous oranges are all for you, dearest. Shall I squeeze one right away? I—I don't believe I've got anything to wear except that old pink rag that's a hundred years—"

"TO wear?" broke in a vibrant, boyish voice from the doorway. "What do the Warings need clothes for, anyhow? What's doing, Bab?"

Andrew Waring came in. A tall, slender youth, whose resemblance to his sister was startling. There was the same litheness of body, the same finely cut features. Both had reddish hair and dark brown eyes, but there was a moody expression on the boy's countenance which Bab lacked.

"You're a nice one," he went on crossly, not waiting for an answer to his questions. "Keeping me hanging round town, waiting in this storm, and all the time you're home."

"I've just got in," Bab hastened to explain. "Anne and Kelcey Brentwood brought me. She expects us over to-night. But what makes me so furious, Andy, is that Ross Darwin said you'd left town long ago. He actually had the nerve to suggest driving me home, the presumptuous toad! Calls you by your first name, too, as if he were an equal!"

"Oh, he's a good scout," Andy defended, the color rising in his smooth, boyish face. "He means well. He's a—"

"Sleek, varnished, pussy-foot creature!" exploded Bab. "And the next time he dares speak to me, I'm—"

She stopped. Andy was leaving the room abruptly. She ran after him, closing the door behind her. Caught his arm with tense fingers.

"Listen, Buddy," she said in a guarded whisper, "you've been drinking. Don't deny it. Oh, you ought to remember what such a habit did for poor daddy. Think how he went to pieces. There's your job, too. Those Harper brothers are awfully narrow-minded. They'd discharge you quick as a wink if they suspected you drank a drop. Why do you do it?"

Andy removed her hand, his dark eyes blazing. "Dick and I only took a cocktail," he defended sulkily. "It's darned hard to work like a truck horse all the time, parleying with rube storekeepers and all. Fine come-down for a Waring, I'll say."

"I know, honey." Bab's voice was soothing now. "But does it help to wind up at Darwin's club every afternoon? And, besides, there's Anne. She's wrapped up in you, Andy. She—she loves you."

"Pipe dream," growled Andy, mounting a few steps. "Fat chance I've got with Benjamin Richardson's heiress. Don't worry, kid, I'm O. K."

"You'll come to-night?" pleaded Bab. "Say you will, dear."

"Who's to be there?" Andy asked, visibly weakening.

"Oh, not many. Kelcey Brentwood arrived to-day, and he—he looks splendid! Same old Kelcey. I—I promised him I'd come—"

"All right, we'll go," Andy conceded. "Tell Martha to hustle the grub and make it snappy."

He whistled a lively tune as he went on up the stairs, but Bab understood. Andy was trying to hide his real feelings, poor boy. A wave of almost maternal sympathy swept through her. It was all so hopeless.

THE Richardson house, a red brick structure with Doric columns, was ablaze with lights when Andy and Bab arrived. The circular driveway was already filled with cars. Anne opened the door herself, a lovely vision in red chiffon.

"Been on pins and needles, afraid you'd back out," she told Bab. But she looked at Andy.

Bab saw the hungry light in her brother's eyes, and her throat contracted painfully. What chance, indeed, did he have of winning a girl whose costume cost more than his monthly salary? Poor Andy! She loved her brother so.

"Hurry down," Anne called after Bab, as the latter moved toward the wide stairway. "They're already dancing."

The two big drawing-rooms were filled with smartly attired dancers

when Bab returned, and for a moment she hesitated about entering, more than ever conscious of her old pink georgette, made over many times. She stood half concealed by the drapes, looking for Kelcey.

So intent on her search was she that a hand on her shoulder made her start. There he stood, his tawny head far above hers. He was smiling. His eyes were shining.

"You did come," he began. "I was about to drive over after you. Let me see your dance card."

She passed it to him, watching while he scribbled his name in several spaces.

"That 'll do for the present," he told her. "Maybe we'll cut and run after a while. Let's finish this number, Reddy."

They slid out on the polished floor, his arm holding her firmly, his lips brushing her glorious hair. "If I'd known what awaited me here," he whispered, "I wouldn't have tarried in Washington so long. But I'm stationed there for three years, Bab. You're going to see a lot of me in future."

A thrill went through her. Her spirits soared. Once more she became the gay, light-hearted Bab Waring she'd once been. They talked as they danced, and she spoke of her work as a book-shop clerk. Made a good joke of it.

"Gives me a chance to polish up my English, you see," she laughed.

Kelcey's blue eyes rested admiringly upon her. He recalled the luxurious manner in which the Warings had once lived, and respected Bab's frankness. The music ended abruptly, but still he held her arm.

Mrs. Richardson, however, plump and pompous, bore down upon them, accompanied by a dashing, golden-haired girl, whose eyes were fixed upon Kelcey in subtle coquetry.

"This is my nephew, Kelcey Brentwood, Loraine," introduced Mrs. Richardson. "Miss Heyward has come to Morrisville since your last visit, dear boy, and I'd like you two young people to be good friends. Barbara, child, come dance with Major Delaney. He's been looking for you."

Bab couldn't help the feeling of bitterness that surged through her. Not likely that she'd see Kelcey again that evening, she thought. Loraine Heyward would see to that.

And yet, scarcely half an hour later, he was at her side.

"Whew!" Kelcey sighed, mopping his brow. "That girl has more energy than any one I've ever met. Who is she, anyway, Bab?"

"The Heywards bought the old Van Buren property," Bab explained. "Awfully wealthy people. She's lovely, isn't she?"

"Don't know; didn't look at her. Just listened. She didn't stop to draw breath. Say, Bab, let's ditch this mob. Where's your wrap?"

"In the dressing room, Kelcey, but we'd better not—"

"Describe the coat, or whatever it is, and have pity on a chap who detests packed rooms and chatterboxes. We're going outside and park in my car. That is, unless you're keen on dancing again with that fat old bird who piloted you around with all the grace of an elephant!"

"For shame," Bab pretended to scold. "That's Major Delaney, our town Chesterfield. But if you really want to go outside, Kelcey, I'll go for my coat."

He put his hand on his heart and gave a comic gasp. "Hurry, if you wish to save little Daniel from being

lionized. I'll be waiting on the side veranda. Make it snappy."

SHE was back in a moment, enveloped in a shaggy raccoon coat, and together they stole to the rear of the house where Kelcey's car was standing. He put her in and wrapped the fur robe about her. Then, before she realized what he was doing, he had started the engine. They sped out to the highway.

"Oh-h! Where *are* we going?" gasped Bab, looking back. "Mrs. Richardson will be furious with us, Kelcey."

"Why should she?" Kelcey coolly demanded. "I was told to enjoy myself, and I'm going to do it in my own way. You and I are going for a long drive, Reddy, and talk over old times."

It was after one o'clock when they drew up before Bab's home. The snow had stopped falling, and a big moon peeped through scurrying clouds, dropping a silver chalice on the girl's sweet young face. Kelcey lingered at the gates as though reluctant to go.

"May I call at the shop for you tomorrow afternoon?" he begged. "*Every* afternoon while I'm here, Babbie?"

"If—if you wish," she stammered. "But I've a hunch your aunt is going to have other plans for your time. I—I'm just a little grub, these days."

"Something of a grubber myself," he retorted. "And as this is my playtime, I've a say-so about the way I spend it. Five to-morrow, Bab."

Her entranced eyes followed him back to the car. How erectly he carried himself. Like some medieval knight who had come riding into her drab young life to brighten it with dazzling happiness. Two weeks, and then—

"To-night, dearest!" he whispered. "I have something to ask you—"

THOSE two weeks passed like a dream. To Bab, they were the shortest she had ever lived, and the most wonderful. Her working hours were filled with thoughts of Kelcey, and she became, for the first time since taking a position, a clock watcher. For five o'clock always found his car in front of the book store.

There were long drives together, sometimes followed by dinner at her

home, where Kelcey's attentiveness to her frail mother would send a rush of emotional gratitude through the girl. There were also parties, dances, and once a supper at the Peacock Club, which was the most distasteful entertainment she'd ever had to endure. Ross Darwin, suave, bold as brass, and presumptuous to the last degree, hovered near her table the whole evening, his black eyes devouring her.

"What's the fellow's idea?" Kelcey wanted to know. "I don't like his manner." And it had been only after a direct and arrogant scrutiny from Kelcey, that the man had taken the hint and moved away. Then Bab breathed easier. But mentally she vowed she'd never enter the gaudy place again.

It was hard, however, to accept invitations from former friends and realize she couldn't return them. She spoke of it to Andy.

"Wish we could give a party, but it's out of the question. We'd have to live on bread and jam for a whole month if we risked it."

"Bet your life we would," he said gloomily. "It's no use, Babbie. I'll be peddling for Harper Brothers when I'm fifty, and you'll be old Miss Waring, at the Morrisville Book Shop. Oh, life's a mess, kid. I told Anne just last night that she'd better forget me and look for a real man—"

He broke off, staring ahead with such hopeless eyes that Bab was panic-stricken. She put her arms around him.

"Keep a stiff upper lip, Buddy," she tried to say gaily. "You know the song about the rain and the rainbow. We've had storm enough, goodness knows, and it's about time for the break to come. Just wait!"

"A lot of hooey," scoffed Andy, his lips curling. "Miracles don't happen in this century. You and Mother and I, with only a leaky roof over us—place going to rack and ruin. If it wasn't for my measly pay check being needed here, I'd—I'd strike out to-morrow and look for a real job. Kelcey tells me I could get a government position, but that would mean being away from home, and that's out of the question."

A lump came into Bab's throat. How wonderful of Kelcey to interest himself in Andy. What a tragedy it had been for the poor boy to leave college so early.

"Maybe you'll be able to do something like that—soon," she said huskily.

"And maybe *not!* Hope, sweet sis, isn't in my dictionary. A fellow with only one very fragile dress shirt to his name is a fool to have dreams. Speaking of that shirt, though, reminds me it must go to the Chinese laundry to-day, if I'm to show up at the Heyward shindig to-morrow evening. And you'd better dig up something to wear, too. That old pink rag will fall off you one of these evenings."

He left the room abruptly, before Bab could answer. She stared after him. A party at the Heyward mansion? Why, she knew nothing about it. Was it possible that Loraine Heyward would invite Andy—alone?

All morning it worried her. But at noon, when Kelcey breezed in during a lull in business, she forgot everything save her joy at having him near her.

"Looking for books, sir?" she asked, assuming a professional air. "May I suggest this new volume of poems, or perhaps you'd prefer Sabatini's lastest romance. Most of our masculine customers like his works."

KELCEY leaned over the counter, his gaze fixed upon her slim, graceful figure in its neat blue serge and dainty white collar. Above

the linen neckwear her face rose like a delicately tinted flower. He took in her sweet, sensitive mouth, straight little nose and wide, intelligent brow, and his pulses quickened their beat.

"What pom could be as beautiful as you, Babbie?" he said softly. "Or what romance more enthralling than—ours? Don't you know we're living the most wonderful one in the whole world—" He broke off with an exasperated, if scarcely audible exclamation. A bevy of school girls were filing into the shop, loudly demanding immediate attention.

"To-night, dearest," Kelcey whispered. "We'll not go anywhere. I've something to say. Something for your ears alone."

He was gone in an instant, but a starry-eyed girl with twin roses in her cheeks went about her duties as though she walked on air. Under her breath she was saying, over and over: "A knight came riding—riding—riding—"

Bab's luncheon hour was one thirty. She was just entering the drug store for her customary sandwich and glass of milk when she ran directly into Loraine Heyward leaving the place. Miss Heyward looked flustered for a moment, but quickly recovered her poise.

"Oh, hello, Barbara," she said lightly. "Stopped at your place, but found you out. Coming to-morrow evening, aren't you?"

"Why — I don't know," Bab hesitated. "I hadn't heard of your dance till Andy spoke about going—"

"For goodness sake! Didn't you get a card? I'm sure mamma's secretary sent one. Awfully sorry. Please come. 'By."

It *could* have been an unintentional error, Bab told herself, as Loraine hastened away. In spite of her father's wealth, the girl was always friendly with everyone. Bab wanted to go—now. By to-morrow evening, she and Kelcey would be engaged! Oh, she'd have to go. The party was being given for *him*. And she'd even risk buying a new frock. The very one she coveted was in a window before which she paused. A white chiffon, with a big silver rose at the waist. A silhouette frock, with a sweeping train. Her size, too.

She asked to get off an hour earlier that afternoon, and almost ran to the dress shop. With a sense of exhilaration she went inside. The salon was crowded with late shoppers, but a busy saleswoman promised to wait on her immediately, and disappeared into a fitting room.

A girl's high-pitched voice filtered through the thin partition. Loraine Heyward was talking to some one. Bab heard every word she said:

"What *could* I do, when we ran right into each other? Of course I don't want those Waring paupers, but you can't offend Anne Richardson, and she is nuts about Andrew Waring. I hoped the creature would take my hint and turn down the last hour invite. But no such luck. She snapped it up like a starved turtle."

"Poor Barbara," answered Loraine's companion. "It's ghastly to come down in the world as she's done. I'm awfully sorry for all of them."

"Save your pity," Loraine laughed. "Her nerve is still intact. Look how she positively clings to that adorable Kelcey Brentwood. It's absolutely disgusting—"

Bab heard no more. She made for the door, her eyes blinded with humiliated tears. Snapping at an invitation —hoped she'd take the hint—clinging to Kelcey— Oh, for a place to hide her shamed head! Somewhere to weep out her stricken heart.

She flew down the street, head lowered to avoid recognition by anyone passing. She must get home—somehow. Mustn't wait for Kelcey to call for her—

"MISS WARING!" Someone was calling her name. She turned in the direction of the sound and saw Mr. Daniel Harper, Andy's employer, standing in the doorway of his building.

"I'd like to speak to you, Miss Waring," he continued, as she paused. "Step inside, please."

She followed him into a small office and dropped into the chair he drew forward, wondering at the gravity of his seamed old face. He took the swivel chair in front of his desk, wheeling it about to face her.

He cleared his throat.

"Hate to bother you, young lady, but we're concerned about Andrew. Where is he? He hasn't shown up for several days, and he has a big sum of money in his possession. Naturally we're worried, my brother and I."

"But he—my brother's in town, Mr. Harper," Bab said quickly. "He—was at home this morning. Maybe—he's on the road to-day. It's early, you know, and he seldom gets in Morrisville before—"

"No, he isn't on the road," cut in the crisp, relentless voice. Two beady eyes searched her frightened face. "In fact, Miss Waring, Andrew should have made his reports on Saturday, and this is Tuesday. He has over five thousand dollars of our money in his possession, and we want that sum banked."

Bab's red head went up proudly.

"If my brother has your money, Mr. Harper, it's as safe as if it were in the bank already. You know that."

"I'm not questioning the boy's honesty—yet," was the terse reply. "I'm wondering why he isn't at work. We've heard rumors lately about our salesmen gambling, and have decided to make an example of the first one caught. I'm sorry, Miss Waring, to say we already *know* that Andrew is both drinking and gambling. Please send him here. That's all."

Bab never knew how she got outside again. Numbed, incapable of clear though, overwhelmed by this stunning blow, she moved down the street like a sleep-walker. A big sign met her dull eyes. The Peacock Club. Could Andy be in there? On an impulse she opened the door. Ross Darwin came hurrying forward, smiling ingratiatingly.

"Why, good afternoon, Miss Waring," he said cordially. "Come in. Great pleasure to see you—"

"I'm looking for my brother," Bab interrupted icily. "Where is he?"

Darwin stared blandly. "What made you think he was here? Andy drops in occasionally, for a little talkfest, but I haven't seen him to-day. Nothing wrong, I hope?"

Some intuition told Bab that the man was lying, but there was no way to prove it. "If he stops in, kindly tell him he must see me at once," she said haughtily, as if addressing a servant.

She closed the door sharply. She did not see the glitter of Darwin's dark eyes, the vengeful curl to his thin lips. It would have made no difference had she done so, for Bab was too terrified to notice anything. She ran almost every step to her home, stopping now and then to press her hand against her wildly beating heart. Oh, she *must* find Andy!

Mrs. Waring looked up from her book as her daughter opened the dining room door. Anyone except Bab's

unobservant mother would have instantly known something was wrong.

"Why, darling, you're early," said Mrs. Waring. "Did Kelcey drive you home? I didn't hear the car."

"No, Mumsie, I—got off an hour ahead of time. Is—Andy here?"

"Not yet, dear. Why, Babbie, child, what's wrong? You're so white—"

"Nothing—nothing but a—terrible headache, Mumsie. I—I'm going to bed. I—can't see any one this evening—not even Kelcey. Tell him I'm—ill—"

She was gone before Mrs. Waring could reply. But she did not stop in her own room. She went directly to Andy's, across the hall. Turned on the lights and began a systematic search, praying wildly that she would not find any evidence of guilt among her brother's effects.

AN hour later she heard Kelcey talking below. Heard him leaving.

"Give her my note, Mother Waring," he called back. "I'll stop in to-morrow morning to see how she is."

Note for her. Calling to-morrow. Just a jumble of meaningless words now to the shaken, ashen-faced girl who stood clutching several slips of paper in ice-cold fingers. *Bab had found damaging evidence against Andy.* Those slips were I O U's to Dick Ware, to Mark Felder, to another unknown person. And they were all cancelled! Paid the day before. Hundreds of dollars—gambling debts. Paid out of Harper Brothers' money!

A little later there was a gentle rap on Bab's door and Mrs. Waring peeped in. Her daughter was lying across the bed, one arm flung over her head. She didn't look up as her mother laid a cool hand on her burning cheek.

"Why, darling, you are ill," Mrs. Waring said anxiously. "You've a fever. We must have the doctor. There's so much flu about—"

"No, no! I'm all right," the girl protested. "Just — a headache, fussy little Mumsie. Ate something that disagreed with me. I—I heard Kelcey downstairs. He—he's gone?"

"Yes, dear. Here's a note he wrote while here. He was awfully concerned, and so am I. Shall I send Martha up with a cup of black coffee?"

"No, nothing. Not a single thing."

Bab's clenched fingers unclosed and took the sheet of paper her mother handed her. She even forced herself to sit up. Tried to laugh.

"What I need is a hot bath and—bed. That's all, Mumsie. I'll be right as a trivet in the morning. Don't worry, dear. Go eat your dinner."

Mrs. Waring closed the door behind her. Bab listened until the footsteps on the stairs died away, then hurriedly opened Kelcey's note, moaning in anguish as she read:

> DEAREST:
>
> For you *are* my dearest—don't be ill! Fight it off. To-morrow is my last day in town, you know, and we will have to show up at the Heyward dance, as it is given in my honor. But listen, sweetheart, we are going to tell them —tell the whole world—of our love, aren't we? You do love me, don't you, most beautiful? We will slip away early, as we did that first night. Oh, I've millions of wonderful plans for us, for Andy, and for dear little Mumsie, too. Life is going to be one long, glorious dream for all of us, darling, darling!

A shudder went through her. This precious gift of love had come too late. Like knights of old, Kelcey had come riding into her dreary life, bringing joy such as she had never dared to hope for, and now he must ride away, leav-

ing her desolate, crushed, disgraced! Share that disgrace with him? Tell Kelcey of Andy's crime? Never, never!

"Oh, send him away, God, before everybody knows it," she prayed wildly. "I — couldn't — bear — that — and still live—"

The hours of that interminable night wore away, and still Andy did not come home. The tiny shred of hope to which Bab had clung desperately was now gone. Her chief concern was to keep all knowledge of her brother's crime from his frail mother as long as possible. And when Mrs. Waring anxiously remarked at the breakfast table that Andy must be oversleeping, Bab told the first lie of her life.

"He's gone long ago, dearest. Had to make a trip out of town, so I rushed him off at four o'clock. Good-by, Mumsie. Home early."

SHE stopped at Harpers' office before going to the book-store, and was met with a suspicious scrutiny when she asked if her brother had been there.

"Haven't seen him," testily replied Mr. Harper. "We're going to, however, before night. If he isn't here by noon, I'll send for the constable. Sorry, Miss Waring, but that's business, you know."

Bab flinched as if a lash had stung her. She, Barbara Waring, afraid to meet the eyes of her world! Andrew Waring's sins lay heavy on his sister's young shoulders that morning.

She did not go out for luncheon at noon. She was afraid to leave lest some message should come from her brother. The awful thought of suicide was ever present. Andy was high strung, given to spells of depression—what more likely than for him to end his disgrace by taking his life?

The telephone shrilled, interrupting these terrible thoughts. She jerked the receiver down.

"May I speak to Miss Waring?" someone asked.

"This is Miss Waring," she replied breathlessly. "What is it?"

"Ross Darwin speaking. Andy is at my place and wants you. He's in trouble—"

"I'll be there at once," she cut in. "At once!"

It had happened at last. And somehow, she grew quite calm as she got her coat and hat and left the store in charge of her assistant.

Ross Darwin opened the door of his darkened café almost before she could turn the knob. He spoke first.

"Andy is up in my rooms, Miss Waring. Let me explain before we go to him. The boy is in a mess of trouble. He's lost a big sum of money belonging to his firm. I wanted to send for you earlier, but he wouldn't—"

"He's been gambling here, in your horrible place!" Bab burst out wildly. "I knew it! Oh, you—beast!"

"Wait a minute," Darwin said coolly. "You're excited, and I excuse your language. I sometimes turn over my private apartment to the boys, but I know nothing of what goes on in the rooms. Andy came here yesterday with two men—utter strangers to me. He vouched for them. I suppose they played cards. Your brother has won some money recently, he told me. But this time he must have laid wild stakes and been wiped out clean. He'll tell you everything—"

"Take me to him," Bab demanded fiercely. And then followed the man up two long flights of stairs.

Darwin threw open a door, disclosing a sumptuously furnished study. Beyond was a bedroom. Bab saw a

huddled form on the bed and ran toward it.

"Andy!" she cried, caressing the tousled red head, stroking a haggard cheek. "It's Babbie, dear. Look at me! Speak to me! Tell me everything!"

"I do, dear, I do," she soothed, although she was shaking like a leaf in a storm. "But this money, Andy. How did you lose it?"

"I — don't know. Swear I don't!

Barbara's head went up proudly. Andy dishonest!

A SHRIVELED face was uncovered. Hollow eyes met hers. Andy fumbled for her hands and clung to them.

"I—don't know what to say, sis," he groaned. "I came here yesterday—met two men—never saw them before. They—had a game on. I—I've been lucky of late—I had Harpers' money—five thousand dollars. Got in town too late Saturday to turn it in, and—well, on Monday I played a bit—with my own money, I swear! I've never used a penny that wasn't mine, as God is my judge, Bab. Believe me, won't you?"

I—I was drinking—and played several rounds, then threw myself across this bed. When I awoke the money was gone! I didn't stake a dollar of it, but nobody will ever believe that. Oh, I've ruined my family. It 'll kill mother. Ross, give me a gun and let me end it all!"

He sat up, his bloodshot eyes like those of a crazed person. Bab caught him in her arms.

"Hush, Buddy," she pleaded. "You don't know what you're saying. There must be some way out. I'll go over to Mr. Harper and beg him—oh, come quick! He's dying!" she shrieked. "Look at him!"

The boy had fallen back on the bed, his face as white as the sheets. Darwin

laid his hand on the clammy forehead, felt his pulse, then turned to Bab.

"Fainted, that's all. Nerves shot to pieces. Been hitting the high spots for some time, Miss Waring."

Bab's anguished eyes filled with passion. "It's your fault!" she cried. "*You* sell bootleg liquor to our town boys. *You* let them gamble here. Morrisville never has had such a blot—I'm going to report you, Ross Darwin. They'll arrest you—"

"They may arrest somebody, but it won't be me," laughed the man. "But I excuse you, Miss Waring. I know the strain you're under. I am even going to offer help. I've enough cash in my safe to cover Andy's losses. Let me lend it to you."

"You—you'd lend us—five—thousand dollars?" gasped the girl. "Knowing I can never pay it back? Why? Why?"

"Sympathy and a desire to help—you," was the soft reply. "Nothing else. No melodrama. No strings to the loan—except your friendship and the hospitality of your home. Is there another friend who'd do as much?"

There was Kelcey, came Bab's frantic thought. Then she shuddered. Not Kelcey! Least of all Kelcey. To have him know of their disgrace would be torture unbearable.

A moan came from the bed. "Let me die, oh, for God's sake, let me die!"

Bab lifted her head and faced Ross Darwin. All the youth was washed from that pallid countenance. Steely determination shone from her brown eyes.

"Lend me the money," she said faintly. "I—I'll pay it back if it takes my whole life to do it."

Darwin's crafty eyes evaded hers. He went into his study and returned almost immediately, handing her a package of bank notes. "The exact amount," he told her. "Would you like me to take it to the Harpers for you?"

"Yes—yes! Go, please!" she gasped. Then ran over and knelt beside the bed. "Brace up, Andy, darling," she murmured brokenly. "It's all right. Mr. Darwin—has—helped us. He's a good friend, after all—"

MORRISVILLE society was astounded in the next two weeks at the sudden friendship that had sprung up between Barbara Waring and Ross Darwin. Her name was on every one's tongue.

"Doesn't surprise *me*," laughed Loraine Heyward. "The girl is desperate for money, and when she found out that Kelcey Brentwood didn't mean business, she turned to the first man who came along. Quite a comedown for a Waring, though. So high-hat about ancestors and all. A common café proprietor who doesn't even speak decent English!"

"You're dead wrong about Kelcey," flared Anne Richardson, who had come up unobserved. "My cousin was awfully cut up when he couldn't locate either Bab or Andy on the night of your dance. And he had to leave next morning. I can't explain anything, but I do know that he writes to Bab by every mail, and she just won't answer."

"Tell that to Sweeny," sneered Loraine. "She's not a dumb-bell. She'd never give a man like Kelcey the gate, then take up with Darwin. They say he's at her house every evening. And, by the way, where's Andrew? He lit out of town like a March wind."

"It isn't any secret that Andy was very ill for a whole week," defended Anne. "He's gone to look for a

better job. I heard from him today."

She didn't add that Andy's letter was an incoherent one, begging her to forget all about him, saying he wasn't worth a thought from her. And Anne's reply was a characteristic one:

> If it's the loss of a dinky old job that's making you act so silly, snap out of it. Get in touch with Kelcey at Washington. He's trying to find you. I'm always the same. ANNE.

That very evening she burst into the Waring house like a small whirlwind, determined to force Bab's confidence.

Such a changed Bab. So numb were her feelings these days that she often marveled at herself, wondering if her power to suffer was dead. At first it was torture to receive Ross Darwin, to permit him to drive her about the countryside. But now it didn't seem to matter. She was mutely accepting any situation which fate thrust upon her.

"I owe him a fortune," she told herself. "But for Ross Darwin, Andy would be—in prison now."

Anne found her stretched across her bed, staring dazedly at the ceiling. She plumped down beside her friend.

"What's all this gossip about you and Ross Darwin?" she asked. "Bab, are you crazy? Letting a man like that rush you as he's doing?"

Bab stared at the girl with hard, bright eyes.

"Don't say too much, Anne," she laughed raucously. "I—well, I may some day be Mrs. Ross Darwin."

Anne caught the girl by her shoulders and shook her. "You've lost your mind!" she cried. "That horrid person? Why, every one would cut you, Babbie. And I was absolutely certain you loved Kelcey," she reproached.

It was the last straw. With a wild cry Bab's hands went over her ears.

"Leave me," she wailed. "If you ever had a spark of real friendship for me, Anne, go—go!"

THE following three days found Bab confined to bed. Nervous chills chased one another over her entire body. One minute she was burning up, the next found her shivering as if half frozen.

She felt like a trapped animal. Of course she could refuse to receive the man she despised, but would that be honorable, she asked herself? In her hour of stress she'd given her word to be his friend, and to break that word now was something she could not do.

"What difference does it make?" she ground out through clenched teeth. "I've already lost Kelcey. Andy's gone—everything is gone. Maybe I'll die soon. Oh, if I only could!"

The afternoon of the third day, however, found her up and dressed. Nothing could be gained by lying in bed. She felt that another hour in the house would find her raving like a maniac. She wanted air—air . . .

She was trying to pinch some color into her ashen cheeks when she heard her mother calling. Bab ran to the door, flung it wide and crossed the narrow hall.

"What's the matter, Mumsie?" she cried. "Are you—" And then she stopped, catching hold of the balustrade to steady herself. Some one was flying up the steps, two at a time. It looked like Kelcey. It was Kelcey!

Then she was in his arms.

"Bab, darling!" he said hoarsely. "Don't look like that! I know everything, precious. But what I don't understand is why you didn't come straight to me—"

"You know—"

"Everything. All that you do, and lots that you don't. Listen, dear, and don't shake like this. Andy came to me yesterday. He told me the whole story. We set out for Morrisville last night to straighten out the matter that you two kids made such a mess of. We went directly to Harpers' place."

"Harpers'?" repeated Bab stupidly. "Why go there?"

"Because I had a hunch they could help us," Kelcey said triumphantly. "And they did. Those bank notes Andy lost were marked. Blue penciled, you see. The Harper men were trying to trap their gambling salesmen, understand?"

"No, I don't. Andy did have the money, and he did lose it—"

"And how!" Kelcey put in. "Stolen from him by no one but Darwin, sweetheart. The same bills he loaned you with such a magnificent gesture, he'd swiped from your brother! I went to his place after seeing Mr. Harper, and choked the truth from the dirty crook. His place is closed. Bab, darling! Look at me! Lord, don't break down now!"

She was lying back in his arms, her small pinched face against his shoulder, her eyes closed. But only for a moment. She struggled for words, her fingers clutching at Kelcey's coat sleeve.

"Tell me again," she gasped. "It—it's like a dream."

Kelcey patiently repeated his story, holding her against his heart. Voices floated up to them. Laughter. A girl's thrilling laugh; a youth's happy echo. Bab stared at the handsome face above hers.

"Isn't that Anne downstairs?" she asked. "And my brother—"

"Right you are, my darling," smiled Kelcey. "Guess he's telling her about that new job I'm going to get him. They're making their plans, those two kids. Think they've cornered the market on happiness. We could tell 'em a thing or two, couldn't we, Mrs. Kelcey Brentwood-to-be?"

Bab's arms went up and encircled Kelcey's shoulders. Her cheek pressed against his. Happiness? After blackest despair, that treasure sought by all mankind was hers—hers. Like a knight of old, Kelcey had come riding to her rescue. He would never leave her side again.

A Girl to Her Mirror

MIRROR, will you tell me
What I want to know?
Will I, a plain girl,
Very lovely grow?

Mirror, will a lover,
Bringing love's bright charms,
Give me gift of beauty—
The rapture of his arms?

—Winifred Virginia Jackson.

"Playing some game?" he asked politely, though his eyes were twinkling. Sonia felt decidedly foolish

Sweethearts for Sale

A girl reporter goes in search of an exciting story and finds a surprising adventure

By Doris Knight Jessee

Author of "Mystery Girl," "Bride of the Dragon," etc.

"ALL set to get off, ma'am?" asked the conductor with an admiring glance at Sonia. "This ain't a real stop, you see. Engine just waits to take water for the climb up to the cañon, that's all. So you'll have to step sort of lively if you want to make it."

"Yes. I know. I'm ready," smiled Sonia.

She hoped he wouldn't notice her excitement. It was silly to be so fussed up! But if the conductor knew that in a moment she was going to meet the man she was supposed to marry, maybe he'd understand! Especially if he knew that Sonia had never seen her fiancé.

When she thought about it she had to chuckle. The whole thing was absurd—ridiculous. It was all Mary Black's fault.

And the funniest thing was the reason why Sonia had journeyed across the continent to the Arizona desert. It was because she had the reddest crop of riotous curls that ever any one possessed!

Sonia put on her tan kid gloves. Then she decided that maybe she ought to have a little more powder on her nose, so she took out her compact and dabbed at her face with the diminutive puff. Some powder got on her glove, and she scrubbed away with her other hand. Her purse tumbled off her lap into the aisle and spilled its contents broadcast.

Just then the train slowed and jerked to a stop. The brakeman seized her suitcases. The conductor scrambled up her purse. The next thing Sonia knew she was standing on a little platform, seemingly in the exact center of nowhere, staring after the departing train.

There wasn't a soul to meet her!

Sonia's heart went right down into her little tan kid slippers and stayed there. Now what was she going to do?

There was a long stretch of desert country. Sand, cactus—more sand, more cactus—as far as she could see. Had she got off at the wrong place?

She fumbled about in the welter of belongings jammed haphazard into the fashionable lizard-skin purse until she found the letter. "Between Valle and Willaba—water tower." This was the only water tower. It must be right, but—

Sonia began to discover that the desert sun might be decidedly warm, even in early May. She mopped her face with her handkerchief and peeled off the gloves she had been at such pains to put on. One of her suitcases was upended. She sat on that and tried to think. What would Mary do in a case like this?

MARY BLACK was a distant cousin of Sonia's. She was twenty-nine, and one of the best-known feature writers on a New York morning newspaper. Just a month ago Sonia had come from Boston to room with Mary. Sonia had decided that she was going to become a newspaper woman, too. But it wasn't so easy. Even with Mary's influence, the Boston girl couldn't seem to get a job. Mary's assistant was leaving to get married, and Sonia yearned for the place.

"I'm doing my best," Mary had sighed. "But why a débutante as pretty as you wants to work on a stuffy old news sheet is more than I can see."

"But now that dad has lost all his money, I've got to earn a living. One can't very well work at being a débutante!" countered Sonia.

"Well, you could marry Billy Harvard or Stew Burns," hazarded Mary. "From what I hear they're both mad about you."

"They're nice," said Sonia; "but I don't love them—collectively or singly! And I'm not marrying for money, thank you. Not on your life. I intend to marry for love, or else not get married at all. So there."

"Have it your own way, child," shrugged Mary. "Myself, I think you're sort of crazy. But if you insist that your life's happiness depends on a dingy old newspaper office, I believe I've found a way."

"Oh, Mary. How?" Sonia was all aglow.

"Mr. Perkins says you can be my assistant—if you put this over successfully."

"Stop tantalizing me, Mary, and

tell me!" Sonia was wild with excitement.

"Read this; and don't split your sides laughing. The saps men do make of themselves!"

Sonia took the clipping Mary held out to her:

> Lonely cowman on palatial ranch desires company of young female. Object matrimony. Girl must be fastidious, fair of face, fanciful in spirit, of fine family, have flowerlike beauty, and possess fiery red hair. Send photo.
> STEPHEN CRAIG CLARKE.

"What is it? A joke?" asked Sonia after she had read it three times.

"If there's any joke, it's on you," answered Mary calmly.

"How do you mean?"

"Gaze on that." Mary's thumb nail rested on the signature. "That convey any meaning?"

Sonia thought. "No-o. I can't say it does."

"No? Well, Stephen Craig Clarke possesses two or three millions—or maybe it's four since he got around to cutting coupons last time. He's a distinctly Western product. Made his money all by his lonesome, without any help from his daddy. From all I hear, his family wasn't so much. But little Stevie made some successful land buys and then chanced on a couple of oil gushers. Things like that just naturally seem to happen to this chap."

"But this is probably a hoax of some kind. Some one might have signed his name to a silly advertisement just for fun. It couldn't be true." Sonia was reading the clipping once more.

"Where did you find it?"

"It was sent me in a plain envelope. No word with it. We often get things of that sort. I answered immediately, addressing the box number. The reply came by air mail: a picture of the gentleman, his signature and everything. Genuine, by gosh! Can you see the gorgeous story it's going to be?"

Mary's eyes had a far-away look, and Sonia knew she was visioning a double-page spread in the Sunday feature section.

"But where do I come in?" Sonia demanded.

"You—oh, you're going to be the red-haired girl who goes out to Arizona to the gentleman's 'palatial ranch'—object matrimony!"

"Mary!"

Sonia was open-mouthed with horror.

"YOU'RE to take my best camera—and get plenty of pictures. Some of the house. Some of the gentleman himself. We can fake yours on to the plate when you get back. And I think it might be well if you kept a diary of daily events. We haven't been running one of those lately. You know the sort: 'Sunday; Stephen Craig Clarke rose early. I heard him singing in the bath. When he came to breakfast he laid a diamond tiara at my plate and caught me close in a passionate embrace.' Yes, I think that would be very nice, indeed, and we'll call you the 'Girl Reporter,' and—"

"Mary!" shrilled Sonia. "I couldn't do any such absurd thing. Of course not. I—"

"I thought you weren't material for a reporter," said Mary, nodding her head. "This proves it."

"But—"

"Subject's closed."

Sonia drew a deep breath. "I'll go," she said wildly. "I'll—I'll be a—a pa-

per bride. You won't expect me really to marry the fellow, will you?"

Mary was all smiles. "Of course not, infant! I sent him your picture and a nice letter, signed by you."

"Ugh!" said Sonia.

"He was fearfully intrigued, and wrote, asking you to come for a visit to his ranch for a week. Then, if you both were agreeable, the marriage would take place with due pomp and ceremony."

"Oh," moaned Sonia. "Will—will there be anybody else at this farm?"

"Ranch," corrected Mary. "Oh, yes, indeed. He made that quite clear. He has a Mexican housekeeper and her husband, who live on the place, and his nephew is part of the ménage. Not to mention the five other red-haired girls who will be visiting at the same time! *And* an aunt he's imported for chaperon."

"Five other red-haired girls?" gasped Sonia.

"Absolutely. You didn't think you'd have clear sailing, did you? Good gracious, no! This advertisement evidently ran in some obscure matrimonial paper, that's why the newspapers haven't got wind of it yet. But even at that he must have got hundreds of replies. He selected six. You are one of the favored ones—due to my letter," added Mary modestly.

"May I ask why you didn't go on this—this matrimonial steeplechase, in person, instead of wishing it on me?"

"Gaze on my dusky hair, darling! The letter the gentleman penned distinctly stated that synthetic red-heads were barred. There are to be tests when you arrive, to determine what part henna has played in your life."

"Oh!" Sonia thought about that. Then: "Does the paper pay my way out there?"

"Heaven forbid! No, innocence, Stephen Craig Clarke pays and pays. He sent you a railway ticket a mile long, and I note that you go on the extra-fare to Chicago, thence you have a compartment straight through to Williams. And from there a parlor-car seat to this forsaken spot where his ranch nestles. It's somewhere between Williams and the Grand Cañon. But you have to get off before you reach the destination marked on the ticket. At some water tower."

WELL, here she was . . .

Sonia looked around again. Not a sign of habitation. Yet—wasn't that speck away off to the right a house? Sonia strained her eyes. Yes, it looked like a house. She couldn't be sure, however. But she was going to find out.

Sonia hadn't gone more than a few steps before she saw a sandstorm approaching. She was sure it was a sandstorm, because she had seen them in the movies.

She ran back to the tiny platform and stood there, fearfully watching the approach of the storm. There wasn't anything to do. There wasn't any place to go. She was at the mercy of the elements. The platform was a length of boardwalk about six feet long, with no shelter of any sort.

Sonia gave one despairing glance at the whirling sand so rapidly approaching, then she crouched down, with a suitcase on either side of her, and shut her eyes tight, awaiting the onslaught of the storm. She put her hands over her ears, so the sand couldn't get in, and knelt there, every nerve taut with anticipation.

Presently she thought she heard a voice addressing her. It couldn't be a voice—and yet—.

Cautiously she opened her eyes and looked up.

A man was standing by her. He seemed to be miles tall, and he was clad in the regulation Western habiliments. Khaki shirt, high boots, woolly chaps over his khaki breeches, and in his hand a huge Stetson hat.

"Playing some game?" he asked politely, though his eyes were twinkling.

Sonia scrambled to her feet, feeling decidedly foolish. Her cheeks were blazing with color.

"I—where's the sandstorm?" she asked.

"What?" He knitted his brows. Then he threw back his head and hooted with laughter. "I reckon I was the sand storm," he said when he could control his chuckles. "Me and old Baldy here." He patted his horse.

Sonia had made a horrible discovery. "Why, you're Stephen Craig Clarke, aren't you?" she asked.

"Not on your tintype!" said the cowboy positively.

"But your picture!" Sonia fished around in her bag until she found the rather blurred photograph he had sent Mary.

"Folks do say we look some alike," said the man, hardly deigning to glance at the print. "But I'm Steve's nephew. My name's Joe Hale. Ten-fingered Joe, they calls me mostly. On account a differentiatin' me from the rest that all have a finger or two shot off."

"Oh!" Sonia's eyes were two big circles of excitement.

"And I 'spose you're Miss Trixie De Lane from the Orpheum?"

"No!" flared Sonia furiously. "I'm not a variety actress! I'm a news—That is, I'm a society girl. My name is Sonia Service."

"So it is," agreed Joe affably. "My fault entirely. I just kind of got you mixed up with one that's coming up to-morrow."

He smiled at her, and Sonia found that his dark eyes held disturbing lights and shadows in their depths. His hair was blacker than his eyes, and combed back sleekly. His chin was square, and his mouth—kissable.

SONIA gave a little gasp as she realized whither her thoughts were taking her. Mary had explained all about this nephew. He was almost the same age as Stephen, but bad luck had dogged him constantly. So he had come to be secretary-companion to his more fortunate relative. He also acted as ranch foreman.

"I forgot my red bandana handkerchief that I usually wear about my neck," he said, the gleam of amusement deepening in his eyes. Sonia became aware that she had been openly staring, which did not add greatly to her already shattered peace of mind.

"I didn't mean—" she stammered.

"Quite all right," he nodded. "And now, shall we be starting?"

"Starting?" Sonia glanced around. "How?"

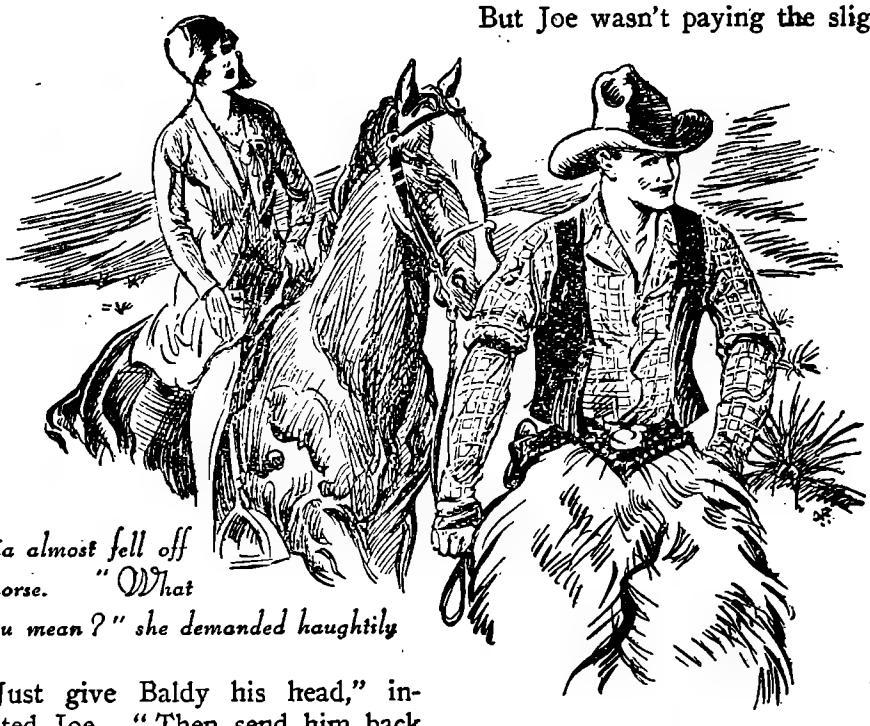
"On Baldy, of course. I'll come back for your suitcases. They'll be quite safe here, I assure you. No one comes to this out-of-the-way corner of the world."

Sonia blinked. Joe had been speaking exactly as she expected a Westerner to talk—as gleaned from Will Rogers and the talking pictures. Now, in an instant, he had shifted to a supercultivated voice with an almost English accent! There was a mystery here. Sonia resolved to ferret it out, but for the moment she made no comment.

"Ready?"

Before she could say a word, Joe had picked her up and swung her into the saddle.

"Oh!" she gasped. The man was strong. He had treated her like a very small child.



Sonia almost fell off the horse. "What do you mean?" she demanded haughtily

"Just give Baldy his head," instructed Joe. "Then send him back for me." He smiled.

"I—I don't ride very well," said Sonia in a small voice. She was finding this very different from being astride one of the sedate chargers at the select riding school she had attended. "Could—couldn't you get on, too?"

He shook his head. "No, Bolivar cannot carry double," he answered.

"Oh, you know O. Henry?" Sonia spoke before she thought.

"So you expect us out here to be a bunch of illiterates!" His voice was rather bitter. "Give me those lines."

She obeyed the command of his tone instantly. He spoke a quiet word to Baldy and they started out across the desert, a strange picture—the big man, the bald-faced horse, and the girl clad in the latest Fifth Avenue fashion, making vain attempts to pull her skirt down over fascinatingly rounded knees.

But Joe wasn't paying the slightest attention. He just stared straight ahead and plodded along, leading the horse.

"I can manage," said Sonia hastily. "You can't walk in all this sun!"

"Nothing at all, ma'am. I'm used to walking. This is just a short piece. Not over a half mile," he said politely. Then, before she could protest further, "This your first trip West?"

"Yes," said Sonia. The skirt of her fashionable fawn-colored tailored suit was reasonably wide, else it would have been up about her waist by now, she mused. If she'd ever dreamed that she'd go horseback riding the minute she arrived—

"Do you like it?" Joe persisted.

"Oh, yes, indeed," she assured him warmly," feeling a positive nostalgia for Forty-Second and Broadway as she spoke.

THERE was silence for a time. Sonia tried her best to locate a sensation of having seen this man before. She knew she couldn't have met him at any previous time, yet he touched some chord of memory.

"You don't look like the sort of girl who'd marry a man for money," he said abruptly.

Sonia almost fell off the horse. "What do you mean?" she demanded haughtily. Then she recalled that she was here as one of six provisional fiancées in quest of Stephen Craig Clarke's fortune. "Oh, I—I see," she finished lamely.

There wasn't anything she could say; any explanation she could give. Yet it hurt to have this man thinking her a miserable little gold-digger. He had such nice, *thrilling* eyes. And his mouth was so—

What under heaven was the matter with her? This was the second time in a short half hour that she had mused concerning the kissable qualities of a mouth possessed by one Ten-Fingered Joe, cowhand and secretary! The long trip across the country must have been fatal to her reason.

"I think Steve was a sap, writing an ad like that," Joe burst out abruptly. "I can't think what got into him."

"I don't think it's quite your place to—to criticize, is it?" asked Sonia primly. Yet she felt a sneaking admiration for Joe's courage in speaking his thought.

"Oh, you needn't worry. I've told him he was a chump; I'm not talking behind his back!"

"Did—did he think that 'f' was his lucky letter or something?" queried Sonia, curiosity triumphing over conversation. "That ad fairly frothed!" She giggled.

"No, ma'am. I was there when he wrote it, and he just took the dictionary and went through, picking out the words that fitted what he wanted. In the f's," he added.

"Do you know you interest me," Sonia said impulsively. "You've a grand sense of humor and—"

"There's the *rancho* just ahead, ma'am," broke in Joe.

Sonia accepted the rebuke.

"So I see," she agreed. "And it *is* rather palatial. All 'dobe and lots of Spanish tiles. Honestly, if it had a couple of bells in a tower it would be a nice replica of a California Mission!"

"The tower is around the other side, just out of view from here. And there are six bells, and they play a sort of tune—like they do on ships, you know."

"Good heavens!" said Sonia. She yearned for Mary's camera. This was going to be a good story!

AS they came closer she could see that a tall wall was built around the whole group of long, low buildings. Even atop this wall were Spanish tiles. The wall was dazzling white, as were the buildings. The tiles brick red.

Baldy came to a stop just outside the gate. Joe reached up his arms and Sonia tumbled into them without question. But some imp tempted her to put her face close to Joe's as he held her.

Slowly, deliberately, he laid his lips on hers in a kiss that was unlike any Sonia had ever known in her twenty years of life. The kiss of this cow-

boy was like fire. It seared her lips—yet she wanted him to go on kissing her forever. She felt as if she were spinning through space in some delightful country of dreams. Her pulses throbbed. Her heart thudded madly.

Joe set her on her feet. "I'll see to your suitcases, ma'am," he said as calmly as if there had been no wild interlude of loving. Without further ado, he flung on to his horse and galloped off. He didn't even glance back.

Sonia drew a sibilant breath. Her eyes filled with furious tears. The insolence of this—this hired man! The very idea! And not even apologizing for his presumption! It would serve him right if she told Stephen Clarke all about his caddish behavior. Not that she would, of course!

She drew a shaking hand across her trembling mouth. Then she took out her handkerchief and wiped her lips. Carefully she applied a thin coating of lip stick. There. Now that kiss was gone—lost—relegated to the limbo of forgotten things! She tossed her head. But all the time her treacherous lips were tingling to the memory of that mad caress.

"*Los Cabellos rojos! Magnificos!*" exclaimed a voice.

Sonia jumped. A fat Mexican woman stood in the gateway beaming at her.

"Er—what?" asked Sonia.

"Those so-lofely red hair," repeated the woman. "Come in, señorita. Señor Clarke waits."

She giggled as she spoke. Sonia wondered why. But she docilely followed her into an inner court filled with cactus plants, some of them blooming and quite beautiful.

There were benches set about. On one of these a beautiful Titian blonde sat regarding Sonia with a jaundiced eye. An orange beach umbrella shaded her.

"Hello!" she said. "Welcome, fellow sufferer, to the Goldfish Bowl! The pay may be good, but the lines are hard."

Sonia began to have a permanent sensation of breathlessness. Was every one just a little mad?

"I don't believe I—understand," she said stiffly.

"No? Well, you will when you get a glimpse of the book! This piece ought to be set to music. That's all it lacks. I hate extemporizing — and that's about all we're required to do. But *how!*"

Sonia continued to stare, uncomprehendingly.

"Say, aren't you Trixie De Lane?" demanded the blonde.

Sonia shook her head. "No, I'm Miss Service. Sonia Service. I—"

"Holy cats!" exclaimed the girl in a tone of horror. "And me ad-libbing myself right out of the picture! You—"

"How do you do, Miss Service?"

A man had come out of a room which gave onto the court. Sonia instantly saw the resemblance to Joe Hale. They had the same dark hair, and were about the same height. But there the likeness ended. Stephen's eyes were a light brown, his chin was weak, and there were tiny lines about his eyes and nose.

With a sinking of the heart, she shook hands.

"Delighted to have you for a guest, Miss Service," he said, as if sensing her turmoil. "El Rancho del Oro welcomes you."

He bowed.

Sonia wished ardently for Mary Black. She didn't like Stephen Clarke at all. Every word he uttered added

to her dislike. As he talked his eyes took in every detail of her costume and dwelt with especial interest on her tan kid slippers and slender ankles.

Sonia gritted her teeth. She must remember that he thought her a scheming money grabber, who would marry a man she did not know merely because of his wealth.

"I'm rather tired," she said. "May I go to my room and freshen up a bit?"

"I'll have Chiquita show you to your room immediately," Stephen smiled ingratiatingly. "But first—have you met Miss Ardath Vere? She is another of my house guests."

Sonia flushed. How common, how awfully common this was—six girls, each trying to outdo the other in order to gain the favor of this very ordinary man! Merely because he had money. Sonia felt almost ill.

"How do you do," she contrived to say to the other. Then she turned and followed the waddling figure of Chiquita across the court.

"*Aqui*—here!" said Chiquita, throwing wide a door. "I hope you like. Me Chiquita. You want me you call. So." She indicated a bell beside the door. Then she went away.

SONIA drew a deep breath. She took off the close-fitting tan felt hat which hadn't been any protection at all from the sun's rays and looked about. The room was certainly huge, big enough to put Mary's whole apartment in and have some space left over. The floor was cement, with bright Navajo rugs thrown carelessly about. There was a bed made of imitation pine logs, and a bureau, highboy and vanity to match. At the far end of the room was a chaise longue, with a colorful serape thrown over it. The chairs were all huge.

"Not so bad!" said Sonia aloud. She rumpled up her fiery red curls with a careless hand, and gazed at her reflection in the mirror. But she wasn't thinking of herself, nor the room. Her thoughts were busy recalling the features of one Ten-Fingered Joe, cowman and secretary.

A knock at the door made her start. "Who is it?"

"Just me. Joe. With your suitcases."

Her heart began to pound away in a most annoying manner as she went to open the door.

"Shall I just leave 'em here?" he asked.

Sonia had been intending to be very aloof and frosty toward him, but she found herself thawing at the obvious friendliness in his glance.

"Yes, thank you."

"I expected you'd have a couple of trunks or so," he lingered to say. "All the rest of the girls did."

Sonia tilted her perky little nose. "I'm used to traveling," she said. "I've been to Europe with only two suitcases. It saves a great deal of fuss and fuming."

"Oh, yes," said Joe admiringly. "I forgot you was a show girl."

Before she could gasp out a denial he had slouched away. Chiquita appeared almost on the instant. She lugged the suitcases into the room and proceeded to unpack, Oh-ing and Ah-ing over each dainty garment as she hung it in the closet. Her delight was so great that Sonia gave her an orchid georgette dance set. Chiquita was profuse in her gratitude. Sonia had to hurriedly bury her face in a towel under the pretense of washing at the thought of Chiquita in the dance set—size thirty-four!

With "*Gracias, Señorita,*" and "*Mil*

gracias"—a thousand thanks—echoing in her ears, Sonia shooed Chiquita out.

She took her bath, then proceeded to don one of her most becoming frocks—a soft Nile green chiffon, with trailing sleeves and an uneven hem line. She looked in the mirror and smiled. Those red-headed girls weren't going to get ahead of her! Buried deep in her mind was the hope that Joe might find her attractive in this dress. But she wouldn't have admitted that thought. Not for worlds.

WHEN she was ready she stole stealthily to the window and looked out. Under the shade of one of the huge umbrellas a little group sat and chatted and drank from tall frosted glasses. Stephen and three girls with varying degrees of ruddy hair. Sonia wished she had a color camera! Cautiously she raised the window a trifle and took three pictures of the congenial group in the court. Then she took several time-exposures of her room. That done, she put her camera away safely and went out to join the others.

Mary Ware was a freckled-face, auburn-haired little girl, a secretary out of work just temporarily. Lois Farnell had green eyes, a milky skin, and looked like a Burne-Jones portrait. She didn't talk much, merely raised a languid eyebrow once in a while. A fourth girl came romping out of the house to join them a few minutes after Sonia arrived. Dare Wells. She looked like Clara Bow and couldn't forget it.

"Now that the whole gang is here," said Stephen, "I want to make a little speech. You all know what this house party is about. Well, I wish you could all win, but since you can't, here's hoping the best girl may triumph — and let's all be friends."

Sonia stared at him in amazement.

"Oh!" she blazed furiously. "I—I don't care if you have three million dollars! It's wasted on you—you—you crude person! Just wasted! How dare you talk as if we were a—a basketball team, or a group of dance-marathoners, or—or a bathing-beauty contest!"

She jumped to her feet and stood facing him, a small, green-clad figure rigid with anger.

Some one chuckled admiringly. It wasn't one of the girls. They were all gazing at her with anticipation written plainly on their faces. Sonia knew why. They were figuring that there would be one girl less to enter the marriage race. One girl less—

With a gasp, Sonia realized that she was a newspaper woman, here for a story. And she had let her red-haired temper spoil everything. Why, this was perfect! Mary would have made a sub-heading of it. "Millionaire makes speech, hoping best girl wins." Perfect—and Sonia had treated the speech as a personal insult.

Aghast, she sank down on the bench and waited for Stephen to order her out of the house.

He did look awfully angry, and he opened his mouth—but just then Joe sidled over to him. Sonia knew who had chuckled. It was Joe. She felt a little surge of happiness that he understood.

"Red-haired temper. Just what you wanted, sir. Wasn't it?"

Joe was looking straight at Stephen. Stephen swallowed.

"Oh—yes," he said, with a sickly attempt at a smile.

Joe included the rest of the group in his slow grin. "Chiquita says that

Pancho—that's her husband—is getting sore because we don't come in to luncheon. So I suggest that we all mosey into the dining room. Pancho is *some* cook, let me tell you."

As they all moved toward the dining room—Mary on one side of Stephen and Dare on the other—Sonia said to Joe in a low tone:

"Sonia!" cried a voice from the doorway

"Thank you. That—that was awfully nice of you."

He smiled into her eyes in the disturbing manner he had, and didn't reply at all.

Miss Malvinia Clarke was already seated at the top of the table when they came in. She was a tiny slip of a woman, white-haired and frail with the weight of years, but with snapping black eyes that refused to seem old. Joe managed the introductions to Stephen's aunt. Sonia thought this a trifle strange, but the rest of them paid no heed.

The luncheon was delicious and Sonia ate heartily.

Miss Clarke spoke hardly at all. When dessert came she begged to be excused and went to her room. It was easy to see that she had no patience with the whole affair, and would have no part in it, other than that of figurehead chaperon.

"When—when did you arrive?" asked Sonia of Ardath Vere, more to make conversation than anything else. "I thought there was just one train a day."

"There is. We came yesterday."

Ardath blinked superciliously at Sonia. Her former friendly manner had disappeared completely.

Sonia wondered why. There were so many strange happenings in this queer house.

"NOW if you young ladies will come to the washhouse at the rear of the building?" Stephen said when they had all finished eating.

"What for?" snapped the girl who looked like Clara Bow. "I've had my bath to-day, thanks!"

"Please!" Stephen looked conscious. "I merely want you all to wash your hair. I have a hairdresser there who will test your locks for henna or other dyes."

"Well, I'll be darned!" exclaimed Mary Ware.

Sonia looked at the soft folds of the chiffon gown. She had to wash her hair in her very best frock! After going horseback riding in her new tan suit! It was almost too much. She set her jaw. This being a reporter had its drawbacks.

All the girls were real red-heads. That was certain. They sat around in the courtyard, huge bath towels shrouding their dresses and their hair drying in all shades of redness. Mary's hair was straight, so was Ardath's—but Dare's and Sonia's hair was a tangle of ringlets.

"Gosh, this is hot!" panted Dare. "Even with the umbrella over me, I feel the freckles coming out like kids to a Sunday school picnic. Isn't this the place where you're supposed to take a siesta every afternoon? Well, I don't care whether it's Arizona or Mexico, I'm napping right now."

And forthwith she marched off to her room. The rest trailed after.

Sonia was the last to go. As she was opening her door, some one came close. She looked up with a little startled cry.

"Just me. Joe." He was smiling at her. "I couldn't let you go in without telling you how lovely I think you look," he said in an embarrassed way. Quickly he turned on his heel and left before she could frame an answer.

Sonia stared after him, her red lips parted. She had hoped the Nile green frock would entrance him; instead he had given her a compliment when she was completely swaddled in a huge bath towel, without a bit of powder on her face, and with her nose beginning to peel from the sun. There was no accounting for tastes—but it *was* rather sweet of him, just the same.

She was smiling as she went in and shut the door.

SHE woke late in the afternoon, feeling refreshed and rested. The sun was going down, she could see that much from the glow in the sky. So she hurried out and stood at the gate.

"Oh!" she said softly as she stared with fascinated eyes at the beauty of the desert sunset. The sky was a mass of brilliant color. Off to the south was a range of mountains that were prismatic under the benediction of the disappearing sun.

"Desert gives a fellow a nice sense of distance, doesn't it?"

She knew it was Joe before she turned around. "Yes," she said. A quick blush dyed her cheeks. Couldn't she ever forget his mad kiss?

"This is the prettiest time of the year out here," went on Joe. "You've no idea how everything blossoms on the desert. Folks have an idea there's nothing but sand and cactus. But there are a lot of little plants, too, nestling in the shade of the cactus plants. And when we've had lots of rain, everything blooms. You'd be surprised. The whole desert—in blossom."

"You love the desert, don't you?"

Sonia realized that she was speaking in a low tone—as if she were in church or something. Well, it did seem like that. Such distances, such vast spaces . . . It made a person feel awfully small and insignificant, somehow.

"Yes."

There was silence, a queer, compelling silence that made Sonia's heart thud like a tom-tom in her breast.

"The—the mountains over there," she said shakily. "They look as if they had snow on the top. But of course it isn't snow."

"But it is," protested Joe. "That's the San Francisco range. Majestic, aren't they?"

"Yes." Sonia cast about wildly in her mind for something to say. She wanted to fill in this dangerous silence with chatter that would save her from herself. But somehow, words eluded her.

Speechless, she stared at the spot where the sun had gone down. She watched the sand and sky seemingly meet and merge and become one. The mountains began to grow black, with purple tints. The sky was a queer, dusky blue, with little patches of smoke-pink clouds left as a reminder of the departed sun.

"It — it's lovely," said Sonia huskily.

"You really think so?" His voice was eager.

"I love this — desert twilight," stammered Sonia, her voice still refusing to be natural and calm.

"Do you?" His tone was strange, too.

She looked up at him. And that was fatal!

The next instant she was nestled close in his arms. His kisses were on her hair. "Lovely little red-head," he murmured. Their lips met and clung. "Dear!" he said, and Sonia felt as if the word had been coined for her alone.

"Good gracious!" said a voice near by. "What a petting party this turned out to be—and with the secretary chappie, too!"

Sonia and Joe started guiltily. Joe's arms grew slack about her shoulders. Sonia hastily stepped away. Ardath was regarding them with hostile eyes.

"Why pick such a well-traveled turnpike to do your necking?" she went on insolently. She faced Sonia. "And since you're here to see if you can qualify for the finals of this Stephen Clarke Matrimonial Handicap, it seems to me this is a bit off the beaten track."

"Oh," said Sonia. "But I—" Her voice faltered and died. After all, what could she say? There was no explanation for her to give.

"I'd—forgotten," said Joe tonelessly. His voice sounded dead.

Sonia remembered the way he had said "dear" such a short moment before. Her eyes misted with tears. Although the night wasn't chilly, she shivered. Did love always bring heartache in its train. Love? What was she thinking? Her breath caught in a soft little gasp of amazement. Love—She couldn't love this—this uncouth cowboy! The idea was absurd, idiotic. She, Sonia Service, of the Boston Services . . .

With a little muffled cry she turned and ran into the house. As she went she thought she heard Ardath and Joe talking together in low tones. She wondered what there was for them to discuss.

FIVE days had gone by since Sonia's arrival at "El Rancho del Oro." Five days crammed with hectic happenings. She sat in her room now, and idly flipped over the closely written pages of her diary. As she read little snatches here and there she was sure that Mary was going to be pleased. She would get the job. She would be a full-fledged newspaper feature writer on a metropolitan daily.

She tried to imagine that she was overwhelmed with joy at the prospect, but in her heart of hearts she knew that she no longer cared. Something had come to dwarf the importance of getting a job. Fight as she might, she

realized that she loved Joe Hale, and the intensity of her feeling frightened her.

She turned another page of the diary. Sentences darted out from the page to mock her.

"Stephen asked me to go walking in the moonlight with him. I accepted. He talked of coming to New York to live. He said he hated the desert. I thought of Joe."

Clearly she must edit this book before she handed it over to Mary! All the way through, Joe's name crept into the entries. She looked further along in the book.

"Stephen kissed me. I hated his caress. I couldn't help thinking of Joe and how differently I had felt when his lips touched mine. Just as Stephen released me, Joe came into the patio. He pretended that he had not seen, but I'm sure he had. How he must despise me!"

She had just finished writing:

"There is some mystery here which I cannot solve. Yesterday I heard Mary saying to Lois: 'After all, even if this is just a game, why not play it for all it's worth? You don't find a millionaire ripe and ready to fall every day in the year!'

"Lois answered: 'Yes, provided he *is* in the marrying mood! But don't forget for one instant that we were simply hired to—'

"Just then she saw me and stopped talking. She looked confused. So did Mary. That isn't the first time my coming has put an end to what they were saying. I wonder why? Do they realize that I am not the person I seem? Do they suspect that I am here simply for the story I can get? But no—then they would be friendly. And that they most distinctly are not. On the contrary, they seem to have banded against me in a little society of hate."

SONIA closed the book with a little bang, and slipped it away in her suitcase. Why had she come on this absurd venture? Well, she was punished all right. In love—and with a man who paid no more attention to her than as if she had been a part of the furniture in the house. If she happened to be in his way, he spoke, courteously, gravely—and went on, without a backward glance. Never, since that mad sunset at the gate, had he sought a moment alone with her. Nor had he shown by word or glance that he cared whether she lived or died.

Not that she could blame him very much! Sonia paced back and forth across the width of the room.

She resolved to leave the next morning when the little train came down from the cañon. She couldn't endure staying under the same roof with Joe any longer and feeling his disdainful eyes searing hers every time she chanced to meet him. But before she went she would tell him the whole story. Let him inform Stephen if he wanted to! Stephen couldn't stop her from using the pictures she had taken, nor the awful drivel she had written in the diary. Maybe Joe'd understand, she thought forlornly. At least he wouldn't hate her as much!

She closed her eyes and thought of the kisses Joe had given her—those wild, throbbing kisses that made her heart a living, pulsing, flame of love. Tears pushed their way from under her closed lids and glistened on her eyelashes. Angrily the girl brushed the tears aside.

She must get out of this room, away from these awful thoughts which kept torturing her with their "might-have-

been's." Hastily she bathed her eyes, smoothed down the red ringlets until they lay satin-smooth against her small proud head. She was wearing a simple frock of pearl gray taffeta. Somehow she thought that Joe liked her best when she looked demure.

Right back of the kitchen was a little separate courtyard. At this time of day Sonia thought it would be deserted, since all the servants were busied with the preparation for the evening meal.

Yet as she approached the patio she heard voices.

"Joe seems to have forgotten completely that he's an engaged man," said Ardath's shrill voice.

Joe — engaged . . . Sonia's hand flew to her heart in betrayal.

"I wouldn't stand it a minute," chimed in Lois. "A game's a game—but not even five hundred dollars for a week's house party is worth losing your sweetheart for! I'd tell Sonia just where to head in if I were you."

"You bet," said Mary vigorously. "You've been engaged to Joe for almost a year, haven't you, Ardath? Why . . ."

Sonia didn't wait to hear any more. She crept away like a little wounded animal. Joe engaged to Ardath—engaged for a whole year, too. Those kisses had meant nothing to him, while to her . . .

SHE ran blindly along, out through the gate and into the desert, her feet slipping and dragging in the sand. There was only one conscious thought in her mind. To get away—far away from the *rancho*. Finally, when she was all out of breath, and her legs wouldn't support her any longer, she sank to the ground, a little sobbing heap of misery.

"Whoa, Baldy!"

She could hear the horse pull up, knew that Joe was dismounting, bending over her. Yet she could not stop the sobs that tore at her heart. He took her in his arms as if she were a baby.

"What's the matter, dear?" he asked.

With a superhuman effort, Sonia swallowed her sobs. She shook her head. "N-nothing," she jerked out.

"Somebody treat you mean?" His voice was grim.

"Yes." She was horrified at herself, but somehow she couldn't stop. "Y-you!"

"I?" The surprise in his voice was unmistakable.

"I—I just overheard. A-Ardath say you—you were engaged to—to her." She had to fight down the sobs again. "You had—had no right to—to kiss me!"

She was holding her little wisp of a handkerchief over her eyes, so she had no idea how he was taking her audacity in thus baring her heart.

"No—I reckon maybe I didn't," he answered gently. "But, you see—" He broke off hastily. "Do you—love me, Sonia?"

Sonia caught her breath gustily. She tried to summon her pride. She mustn't let him know. Not ever. She would dissemble, pretend. She would . . .

"Yes," said Sonia, and her voice was a mere breath of sound.

"My dear! My dear!" He was covering her face with kisses. She clung to him, her arms clutched about his neck.

"Would you be content to live here on the desert with me, Sonia? I'm just a cowboy, you know." He was whispering the words close to her ear.

"Yes." Now was no time for half-way measures or evasions. Sonia was listening to the dictates of her heart.

"You darling!" He kissed her again, this time on her salt-drenched lips. "Then will you do as I say—exactly?"

Sonia nodded.

"All right!"

There was exultation in his tone. He strode along toward the *rancho,* carrying her with no effort at all. Sonia nestled in his arms, vibrant with happiness.

"Then listen. Go to your room and I'll send in a tray for dinner. After that, let Chiquita dress you in a gown that I have had sent down from Los Angeles. Will you do that?"

"Of course." Sonia would have promised him the moon.

But when she was alone in her room, eating the dinner the chuckling Chiquita brought in, Sonia began to wonder. After all, Joe hadn't denied being engaged to Ardath. Was she letting love make a fool of her?

There was the sound of much scurrying about outside. The hum of voices came to her ears, and a girl's high-pitched laughter.

IMPATIENTLY Sonia put aside her tray and went to the window. She blinked. A powerful searchlight was sending its beams into the sky. A searchlight at the *rancho!* How strange. As she puzzled over this, the whir of an airplane came to her ears.

All excitement, she ran to the door. Twice she tried the knob before she realized the truth. She was locked in!

There was a hubbub of greeting, then a girl's tones.

"Hello, Joe; howdy Steve! Got in a little late for the celebrated house party, but the dress wasn't done, so I waited for it, as per orders. But I get my five hundred just the same, don't I, Steve?"

"Hush Trixie!"

This was Joe. The voices all faded away to a confused murmur.

Trixie! She had heard that name before. Who was this show girl, and what dress was she talking about? And twice now Sonia had heard the mention of five hundred dollars as a price for the week at the *rancho.*

Just then the key grated in the lock, and the door swung open. Chiquita waddled in bearing in her arms a great swirl of white satin. The younger Mexican maid followed with yards and yards of magnificent lace held carefully so it would not touch the floor.

"What under heaven?" began Sonia.

"A dress, *muy bonita!*" cried Chiquita. "You are to wear it. Close your eyes. I put on!"

Sonia was about to protest when she thought better of it. So she shut her eyes tight.

She felt Chiquita pull off the taffeta gown and slip the new one over her head. Something was put on her head, some odd sort of hat that took her a long time to adjust.

"Now!" exclaimed Chiquita. "Behold!"

Mirrored in the long pier glass was a lovely demure bride in trailing shimmering white satin! On the red curls was set a wreath of real orange blossoms, from which cascaded a veil of silken lace.

"Sonia!" said a voice from the doorway.

Sonia wheeled. Joe stood there, staring at her as if he saw a vision. But such a different Joe! He was clad in faultless evening dress.

"Sonia!" he repeated. Then he crossed the room and took her two little trembling hands in his. "Dearest! You look—like an angel!"

Sonia gazed up into his eyes and the love she read there steadied her.

"I don't—quite—understand," she said slowly.

"I'm kind of afraid," he said humbly. "I've taken an awful chance. You see, this whole thing was just a sort of—masquerade."

"Masquerade?"

"Yes. I knew you didn't remember, but— Two years ago I danced with you at the Yacht Club Ball in Boston. You were just eighteen then —and cruel. I showed that I liked you and you laughed at me, because I talked and acted like—a crude Westerner. You never even let me tell you my name."

"OH!" Sonia's cheeks burned. That explained the vague stirrings of memory that had bothered her every time she talked to Joe. "I—I'm sorry," she faltered.

"Don't be. I'm the one that 'll have to be begging your pardon in a minute. You see, I fell in love with you that night at the dance. So—I kept track of you. I found out all about Miss Mary Black and her newspaper. So I had one special edition of a matrimonial paper printed and bought all the copies myself. I sent a clipping to Miss Black. I knew that would be enough to get her interested—and I thought she'd send you on account of your hair!"

"But the rest of the girls?" faltered Sonia.

"Ardath got them. They're mostly show girls out of a job."

"And they were paid five hundred dollars for the week, to pretend to be—be claimants for Mr. Clarke's heart and hand," said Sonia with a sudden flash of memory.

"Why, yes, but . . ."

"But why — this?" Sonia touched the skirt of the beautiful wedding frock.

"I sent to Los Angeles for this three days ago—along with a minister who's waiting out in the living room—and some flowers, and—"

Between tears and laughter, Sonia said: "And you were as sure as *that?*"

"Just bluffing!" said Joe, and Sonia saw that he meant what he said. "You see, I love you so!"

Sonia managed a rather trembling smile. "I—I love you, too," she said.

"Dearest!"

But before he could take her in his arms, Ardath came dashing up. "Would you mind if Joe and I got married after you folks? Trixie says the county clerk, or whoever you have out there making out licenses, can give us one, too."

"Joe?" parroted Sonia in blank amazement.

"Sure." Ardath looked at her. "Well, for the love of tripe, hasn't he told you *yet?* Then I will! Allow me to make you acquainted with your future husband, Mr. Stephen Craig Clarke! Well, so long. I'm going to herd up Joe. This masquerade has darned near ruined that cowboy!"

She darted off.

"Can you forgive me?" asked Stephen, looking down at her fondly.

For answer, Sonia went straight to the haven of his arms. "What a grand newspaper feature this would have been!" she sighed as she stood on tiptoe for his kiss. "But we can't have everything, can we?"

"*You're* everything to me!" Stephen said as his lips met hers.

They were completely unaware of the listener

Queen of Hearts

Two kingdoms for an American girl to rule over—which should she choose?

By Barbara Bliss

AS far back as she could remember, Lorna Cravanus had lived in the rambling old house on the coast of Maine.

And always, it seemed, Peter Saganya had been both parents and guardian all rolled into one. Only vaguely could she recall her real father, Michael Cravanus, who had died when Lorna was four years old—three years after her mother's death—leaving the girl in the care of his best friend, young Peter Saganya.

Lorna had tried to love Peter. Just why she had never succeeded was somewhat of a mystery to her. For Peter was goodness and kindness itself. And yet, even in her childhood, she had sensed that Peter's care of her was not actuated by love. He guarded her, reverenced her, but made no pretense of affection.

Peter's whole heart seemed to be wrapped up in only one thing, his native country—Bolaria, a small principality of Southeastern Europe—from which he had come to America with Lorna's parents just before their daughter was born.

In the old house on the seacoast Lor-

na had spent her childhood listening to tales of Bolaria. In no other place on earth, according to Peter, were forests so green, so impenetrable, so charged with magic. The very wind that blew through them sang songs of things it had discovered in the heart of a wood—songs of gypsies, wild and free, songs of fairies and dryads, shy and fleet of foot. And in no other land on earth were the castles so magnificent, the peasants so picturesque, the great ladies so beautiful, and the men so brave.

"But why did you and father ever leave Bolaria, Peter?" Lorna asked one day when she was a small child.

Her guardian's keen gray eyes grew dark with resentment.

"They dethroned and assassinated our king," he explained heavily. "And since your father and I had fought for the old régime, our lives were in danger under the rule of the new monarch. So we came to America—to make our fortune."

"And did you make it?"

"Not yet. But one day, little lady, we will be rich—very rich."

When Lorna was twelve, affluence suddenly and mysteriously descended upon them.

She had been attending a village school, as well as studying the Bolarian language at home with Peter, but now she was sent to a fashionable boarding school. The house was completely and comfortably refurnished. Several competent servants assisted the one elderly woman who had formerly taken charge. Also, Lorna was given all the new clothes she needed, and plenty of spending money. It was as though a fairy godmother had waved a wand over the house on the seacoast.

And so, from the lowly position of ward to an impoverished foreigner, Lorna found herself regarded as the heiress of a wealthy and distinguished Bolarian. At first it was very confusing. But after all Lorna was not only American, but wholly feminine. She stepped into her new position with youthful agility.

DURING the next six years, if Peter had had his way, Lorna would have made few friends; but Peter had never been able completely to govern the girl, and beyond a certain point he had never tried to coerce her.

He had noticed years before, and with satisfaction, that there was a strain of haughtiness in his ward's nature. This had been evident to him when he and Lorna were still very poor, yet he had done nothing to stifle it. He had tried only to temper the trait with the complete courtesy of consideration, and in this he had succeeded.

Lorna, at eighteen, was as dark and lovely and romantic as a gypsy maiden. There was a suggestion of scorn in the carriage of her small head, but more than a suggestion of sweetness in her sudden, almost dazzling smile.

It was in her eighteenth year that Lorna met Barry Shayne at a dance. Very soon afterward Peter noticed that the sweetness of her smile had intensified. And Peter grew watchful.

One night in June, looking out of a library window, he saw Barry Shayne and Lorna on the veranda together. And Lorna was in Barry's arms.

With a stab of dismay, Peter listened intently to hear what they were saying.

"Gypsy eyes!" Barry murmured. "Oh, my very dear, I adore you so!"

"And I love you," Lorna said vi-

brantly. "I've loved you for ages, now—two whole months."

"Then you'll marry me, darling, won't you?" Barry pleaded.

"Yes," said Lorna, "if you're sure you want me."

Then Lorna was crushed in the arms of the tall, fair-haired man who was tanned of skin and, in the eyes of Peter, aggressively American, and she was returning the American's kisses with youthful abandon. Obviously she was determined to marry him. Peter's eyes narrowed.

At last, with a short, ecstatic sigh, Lorna rested her head on Barry's shoulder and gazed thoughtfully up at the moon. What a great, round, joyous ball it was! And how gayly and tirelessly it sailed across the sky—just for the purpose of lighting the world for lovers.

Because, after all, Lorna reasoned, nobody ever did pay any attention to the moon unless they were in love.

"It's a lovers' lantern — the moon, I mean—isn't it, Barry?" she asked dreamily.

"Why, yes," said Barry. "It lights the whole world. I used to think I would like to travel through unknown countries, wherever that old moon shines, in search of adventure. But now I want all the world encompassed in one little girl with gypsy eyes."

"So," said Lorna, "you are a poet—and I've discovered you."

VERY much to her surprise, the following day passed without Lorna hearing anything at all from Barry. She could not understand it. He had called her on the telephone every day, and, since he was stopping at a summer hotel only a few miles away, he had managed to see her as often as he telephoned.

All day long she expected to see him dash up to the house in his long gray roadster. It was not until late at night that she gave up hope of seeing him.

Her emotions, she discovered, were confusingly mixed. She was hurt and indignant and not a little frightened. Something must have happened to Barry. He would never let this day, of all days, pass without seeing or communicating with her.

As this conviction grew stronger with each passing minute, Lorna finally arose and went to the telephone, determining to call Barry's hotel and find out what had happened.

But the telephone was out of order. And that, of course, explained everything. Barry must have had a business appointment which had prevented him from coming out to see her, but he had tried to telephone her.

Perhaps he had tried several times. Yes, of course he had. And everything was quite all right. She would see Barry to-morrow, early.

But the next morning Lorna found a letter from Barry beside her plate on the breakfast table. She was alone in the room, so she opened it at once, her eyes bright with expectancy, her cheeks glowing. What a darling Barry was!

Then she read his letter:

DEAR LORNA:

I don't know how to say what must be said; so I think I had better try only to be direct and honest with you.

I have been thinking over what happened last night and I have decided that I was momentarily mad. Such beauty as yours is enough to drive a man mad, Lorna. It can make him feel that he is eager to commit any folly to possess you. And it *would* be folly for me to marry. I am too restless, too unstable to tie myself down with the responsibility of a family.

Besides, so far I have seen very little of the world. I want to travel through

strange countries and find my romance in adventure, not in marriage.

And, feeling this way, Lorna, the only decent thing I can do is say good-by to you. It is hard, because I want to take and hold you—but if I did, neither of us would be happy. Our best chance for happiness lies in never seeing each other again.

Try to forgive me if I am hurting you now. You will forget me, dear.

And try to realize that this is best for us both.

I will never forget you.

BARRY.

LORNA raised her head and stared at the wall opposite her. There was a picture on it, a hunting scene. How red the men's coats were! Why should they be so red? Perhaps that color made them feel warm on cold mornings like this.

She shivered, looked down at the letter she was still holding in stiff, cramped fingers. And then a wave of sheer panic swept over her.

Barry didn't want to marry her; he wanted never to see her again! But then, since she loved him so, what was she going to do without him?

Barry was her life; he was everything—just all there was. To go on living without him now would be impossible. And yet—what could she do? His letter was final—hideously, terrifyingly final.

She dropped the letter, folded her arms upon the table, and buried her head in them, tense, dry-eyed.

"I can't *bear* it!" she gasped. "Oh, I *can't!*"

Thus Peter found her when he came into the room.

"My dear," he began solicitously, "are you feeling ill?"

Lorna raised her head and regarded him with weary, lackluster eyes. It was fortunate, she thought, that she had not told Peter about her engagement to Barry. She had wanted to keep the thought of it all to herself for a few days. Now—well, now there would be nothing to tell.

As Peter was regarding her anxiously, she made an effort to reassure him.

"No, I'm not ill—just lazy, I suppose."

"I am glad," Peter told her, "because there's something important I wanted to tell you."

Listlessly Lorna noted that he looked even more solemn than usual. If only he would go away and leave her alone! But there would be no use hoping for that.

"What is it?" she asked.

Peter seated himself beside her and spoke slowly, impressively.

"Have you ever wondered what your father's position was in Bolaria, Lorna?"

"You told me he was a soldier," she reminded him.

"No, I did not say exactly that, although I may have given you the impression, because I did not want you to question me too closely."

"Why not?"

"Because I promised your father never to disclose his identity to you unless his line should be sought out to return to the throne!"

Then, as Lorna continued to stare at him, stupefied, he added:

"*Your father was the uncrowned King of Bolaria, His Majesty, Michael II!*"

STILL Lorna did not speak; so Peter went on with his story:

"Your grandfather, King Michael I, was assassinated, Daros usurped the throne, and your father, the crown prince, barely escaped with his life. Daros and his followers were

determined to stamp out the royal family, leaving no one who could dispute his claim to the crown. We were very fortunate, however. Your father and mother were saved that they might come to America and give to the world a daughter—who is now the Queen of Bolaria! *Long live the Queen!*"

Lorna raised an unsteady hand to sweep her curly dark hair back from her forehead. Her eyes were wide, startled.

"Queen?" she breathed. "I? Why—Peter—you must be mad!"

Peter smiled understandingly.

"I presume it may seem so to you. To me it seems most natural, for I have trained you all these years for the position you will now hold. I have always believed that loyal subjects would avenge Michael I and restore his rightful heir to the throne.

"When you were twelve years old I received word from Bolaria that plans were being made to dethrone Daros and put you in his place. And money was sent to me that I might fit you to wield the scepter. On that money we have lived for the last six years—for the loyal Bolarians were wise; they did not strike until the time was ripe."

"You mean," Lorna asked tensely, "that they have killed Daros to put *me* in his place?"

"Of course not," he said evasively. "Those things to-day are managed, one might say, more sanely. You will never be bothered by Daros. We can go to Bolaria—"

"Go to Bolaria! Am I supposed to do that?"

"Certainly. Did you imagine that you could rule Bolaria from America?"

For a brief space Lorna stared at Peter, as though she saw some one else standing there in his place. Then, suddenly, she threw back her head and laughed. It was a strange, wild laugh, compounded of irony, bitterness and hysteria.

"So I'm a queen!" she marveled through trembling lips. "Are queens ever jilted by their lovers, Peter?"

Peter regarded her with shocked amazement.

"Certainly not, your majesty."

Lorna's dark, pain-swept eyes fixed themselves upon him.

"'Your majesty'!" she repeated half fearfully, below her breath. "Am I to be called *that*—now?"

"Of course, and I must not forget it. Then, before we reach Bolaria, you will have become accustomed hearing yourself so addressed."

AFTERWARDS it seemed to Lorna that she had lived through a dream. There was the trip on a great ocean liner with Peter, who, she learned, was a Prince of Bolaria, a very great nobleman in his own land. Peter continued to address her as "Your Majesty." Lorna wondered if ever in this world or the next she could become accustomed to that title.

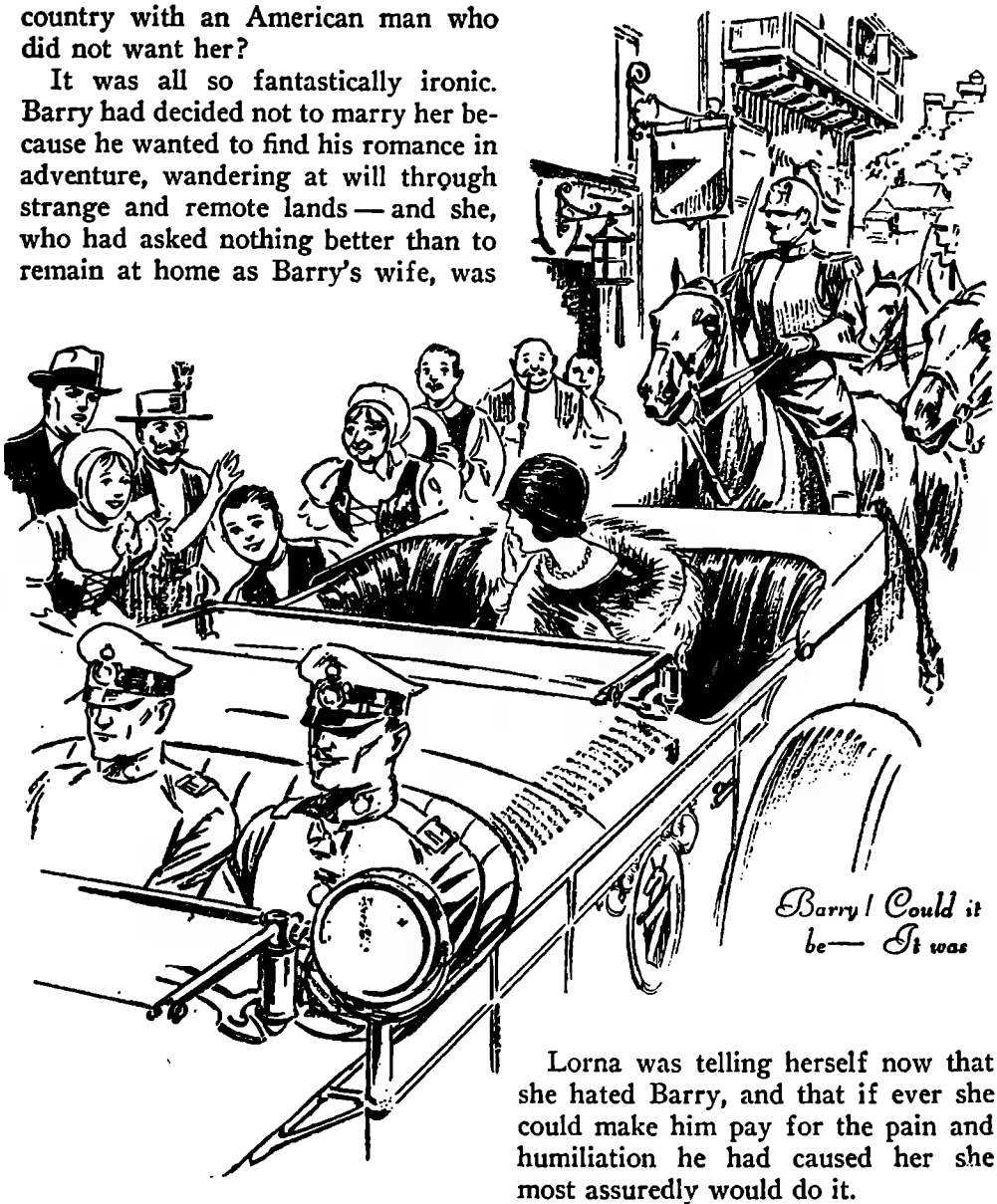
Also she wondered if her father had been right in forbidding Peter to tell her before that she might one day become the Queen of Bolaria.

But Michael II had never really believed that either he or his daughter would rule his land. And he felt confident that if Lorna should never be called to the Bolarian throne, she would be happier knowing nothing of the position she might have occupied.

It seemed to Lorna that nothing in the world mattered—not even being a good or bad queen. Of what use was a kingdom to an American girl who wanted to stay forever in her own

country with an American man who did not want her?

It was all so fantastically ironic. Barry had decided not to marry her because he wanted to find his romance in adventure, wandering at will through strange and remote lands — and she, who had asked nothing better than to remain at home as Barry's wife, was sailing toward Bolaria to be crowned a queen!



What would Barry say when he learned what had happened? With this thought there came to Lorna some of the old arrogance that her love for Barry had recently subdued. And as the days passed, Peter noticed that she carried her head with *hauteur.*

Lorna was telling herself now that she hated Barry, and that if ever she could make him pay for the pain and humiliation he had caused her she most assuredly would do it.

AT last they reached Bolaria, with its verdant mountains, its tiny villages, its vast forests, its wild, elusive beauty. Lorna was curious and excited, but in Peter's eyes there was a deep and solemn joy. For Peter had come home.

The peasants gathered to welcome

their young queen. Lorna, seated beside Peter in the open motor that had met them at the station, looked out upon the scene with a growing suspicion that at any minute she might awaken and find herself back in the old house on the coast of Maine.

For it would, she reflected whimsically, be easy enough to dream of a scene like this. One had watched them so frequently in news reels at motion picture theaters. Could it be true that she was actually *living* this particular scene?

She looked at the guards on horseback riding before their motor and listened to the clang of the hoofs behind her. More guards! Tall men they were, and dark, almost swarthy. Their uniforms were not new, but certainly, to Lorna, they were impressive.

And the peasants. So many of them, and all so colorfully, so picturesquely garbed! The men with white shirts and bright sashes; the women with gay, quaint frocks, white aprons, and flaring headdresses. How dark and how bright their eyes were, how red their lips, and how white their teeth as they flashed smiles of welcome at their new ruler.

"Smile at them, your majesty!" Peter eagerly instructed. "Smile—bow!"

And Lorna, surely at that moment the shyest young monarch that had ever looked out upon her subjects, obeyed.

ALMOST two months passed before she began to feel any sense of reality in her surroundings. Sometimes she thought that if she could leave the royal palace and live somewhere else she might feel less like the heroine of a motion picture and more like a real human being. And then, gradually, the wild charm of the country and the medieval beauty of the palace grew upon her.

It was so old, that palace! What tales it could have told of love, intrigue, and warfare! For how many centuries had it stood high on this mountain, above the dim, dense forest, the stronghold of the Bolarian dynasty.

In its great entrance hall there were faded, tattered banners that had been carried through ancient wars, and brought back by the victors. Also there were suits of armor that had been worn by the dark-skinned Bolarians who had fought in those wars.

What were they like, those long-dead warriors? Lorna wondered. Did their ghosts wander sometimes through the narrow stone corridors of this old palace? If so, what did they think of the new, young queen who had come from across the sea and who was really an American girl? What if they could know that the present Queen of Bolaria had been jilted by the man she loved?

This thought rankled. Lorna was growing more arrogant these days. And her attempts to harden her heart against Barry were partly responsible for it.

Meanwhile, exultantly, Peter was making plans for Lorna's coronation, which was to take place in early May.

THEN, one morning in March, Lorna's carefully acquired poise was shattered quite as completely as though she had been a peasant girl instead of a queen.

She was riding through the village in her open car. Before and behind her rode the mounted guards. And as always, the approach of the sovereign was a signal which brought the villag-

ers out of their homes to curtsy and sometimes throw flowers into Lorna's lap.

But this morning, as Lorna smiled at the group on the steps of the village inn, she encountered two very blue eyes that were staring at her in stunned astonishment. They belonged to a tall man with tanned skin and fair hair.

Barry! *Barry Shayne here in Bolaria!* Surely Lorna's smile was frozen on her face! Surely every one must notice—

And then, while she was still smiling upon her subjects in a manner that would, under the circumstances, have filled Peter's heart with pride, Lorna's motor swept out of the village and into the quiet of the country.

Oh—Lorna elevated her firm young chin and fought to keep her lips from trembling—she *hated* Barry! She hated and detested him!

Suppose he should try to see her? He wouldn't, though. He would never dare. But if he *did* try she would order the guards to turn him away from the palace gates.

THAT night the moon sailed high and full over Bolaria. Lorna, feeling disinclined to talk with Peter, and too restless to read, wandered out into the garden and along its winding paths. She was wearing a filmy frock the color of evening primroses. It was held taut about her slim hips by an old-gold buckle studded with emeralds and topaz.

Only once did she look up at the moon, and then it taunted her.

Could it be possible that she was the same girl who had stood on the veranda of that old house in Maine, looking up at the moon from the shelter of Barry Shayne's arms? Was she the girl who had thought the moon a joyous and kindly planet that sailed the skies for the purpose of lighting the world for lovers?

How, Lorna wondered now, could any one have thought that cold, austere light either jolly or kindly? How could anybody have looked upon its remote detachment and called it a lovers' lantern?

"Lorna!" exclaimed a low voice almost beside her.

Swiftly Lorna turned — to face Barry Shayne!

He had come from around a clump of shrubbery, out on the garden path.

It seemed to Lorna that her heart turned over, and then began to beat so loudly that each heavy thud echoed through the garden; but her mind worked quickly. Barry—*here!* How had he got into the garden? But yes, of course, over the wall.

Why not refuse to recognize him, swear she had never seen him before, play to her utmost capacity the part of Bolaria's queen? Surely that would cut more deeply than anything else she could do.

"What do you want?" she asked with remote dignity. "And how did you come into the garden?"

"Why—Lorna," Barry stammered, "I just had to see you. I—I haven't forgotten—"

"Well, I have," said Lorna coldly. "I shall call the guards—"

"No! Please wait a minute! I—I must talk with you—"

"You are, perhaps, more presumptuous than you realize. Do you know who I am?"

"I—I thought I did. But you seem so strange—so different from the Lorna I used to know."

For a brief minute Lorna regarded him without speaking.

"If only I can punish him!" she

thought desperately. "Let him suffer as I have suffered."

Barry looked at her appealingly.

"I came to warn you, Lorna—your majesty," he amended. "I have been hearing reports about a man named Daros who has a stronghold in the hills and is supposed to be looking for excitement. I hope there is nothing in it."

Lorna gazed fixedly at her former lover. She thought of Daros, the man who had ruled Bolaria before she became its queen! Evidently he wanted the throne back and was plotting trouble. How strange that Peter had not told her!

Was her life in danger? For when Daros had wrested the throne from her grandfather, he had killed the old king.

"I appreciate your kindness in coming here, Mr. Shane," she said. "I will look into those reports. And will you please come back to-morrow? I wish—"

The queen checked herself hastily.

"At what hour may I come?" Barry asked eagerly.

"Twelve o'clock noon," was the reply. "And now, good night."

Barry slipped quietly out of the garden of the royal palace.

ON the following day Peter, who was now the prime minister and power behind the throne, told Lorna that he was going away for a week, and advised her not, under any circumstances, to leave the palace grounds while he was gone.

"I am going to the Count Argus Delphano's castle to plan what it is best to do with Daros, the pretender. He is making a little trouble in the hills, I believe. Nothing serious."

It suited Lorna very well indeed to have Peter go away for a while. She did not even question him about the personal danger she might be in from the dethroned Daros. For Peter, Lorna knew, would tell her what he wished to tell her and nothing more.

Promptly at twelve Barry arrived. His tanned face was flushed, and there was about him an air of suppressed excitement.

"I have my car outside, Lorna, your majesty," he said when they met in the entrance hall. "And I've been wondering—do you suppose there is any chance of inducing you to go for a little ride, without that whole cavalcade of soldiers before and behind us? I'm not accustomed to the ways of royalty, you know, and I'd feel foolish riding through the street surrounded with guards. I'll take good care of you," he added.

"I think," said Lorna thoughtfully, "that I would enjoy such a ride. But I am not supposed to go outside the palace gates without the guards, you know. Such a thing is unheard of."

"Couldn't you slip out — just this once?" Barry pleaded. "It's such a glorious day."

"I might," Lorna confessed. "Where is your car?"

"Outside the palace gates. But I can take it anywhere you say."

"Well, there is a small gate in the garden wall, and the key is on this side. I could slip through there, and you could bring the car around. Come, I will show you."

THUS it came to pass that a Bolarian queen, for the first time since the land was ruled by a monarchy, drove along the open countryside unattended by either guards or soldiers.

This particular queen was not es-

corted by any one at all but a very young man with fair hair and tanned skin, who was not even a native of Bolaria.

But Lorna, for the first time in two months, was conscious of a buoyant, exhilarating sense of freedom. And even when she reminded herself that she detested the man beside her, and was planning to break his heart, her spirits went on soaring.

After all, she concluded, it *was* a glorious day, and she *had* successfully slipped away from those tiresome old guards.

She received her first intimation that something was wrong when Barry turned the car down a rough road that cut across country toward the border.

"Where are you going?" she asked in surprise.

Barry hesitated a moment. Then:

"Listen to me, Lorna," he said. "I might as well tell you the truth, and it won't do you any good to protest. I am taking you away from Bolaria forever."

"You— What do you mean?" Lorna faltered, staring up at him in astonishment.

After the way he had treated her in Maine, how dared he speak to her in this fashion?

"I am Lorna Cravanus," she said, "but I am also the Queen of Bolaria. How dare you speak of taking me away from this country?"

"BECAUSE"—Barry spoke gently—"your life is in danger each moment that you remain in Bolaria. I suspected this last night, but to-day I happen to know what I'm talking about. That Daros chap, who believes he is the rightful heir to the throne, has a large following. The men of the hills have gone over to Daros's side. Which means that his followers outnumber the villagers and the palace guards and the Bolarian army five to one. They have planned to attack the palace to-night."

"But Peter?" questioned Lorna blankly.

"I regret to say," Barry explained, "that the Prime Minister of Bolaria has deserted to the rebels. No, please don't interrupt me. I have brought you here where you could see for yourself."

Barry stopped the car on a mountain spur which looked down into a valley.

"See," he pointed.

Far below, at their feet, a road wound its way through the valley, and on that road the rifles and banners of the rebel army were gleaming in the sunlight.

Heading the procession was Daros, already wearing the crown of Michael I, Lorna's grandfather, while beside him rode the traitorous Prince Peter, Prime Minister of Bolaria and Commander of the Royal Guard!

"They're marching toward the palace," said Barry. "Your former guardian, Peter Saganya, knows on which side his bread is buttered. He engineered that coup in the first place so he could make favorable terms with Daros. You were but the instrument in his hands, Lorna—my own darling, precious Lorna!"

The queen stiffened with anger.

"It is just as well," she asserted. "I never wanted to come to Bolaria anyway. I prefer my own old home every time." Bitter memories suddenly assailed her. "And you, Mr. Shane, will please refrain from calling me 'Lorna darling.' My name is Miss Cravanus. If you had any pride at all—"

"I haven't," Barry replied humbly; "not the kind that could stand between me and the woman I love. Even though you did throw me over—"

"*What?*" Lorna gasped. "I threw *you* over! Oh, how dare you say that after the letter I received from you?"

"I NEVER wrote you a letter in my life," Barry asserted, his lips stern, his eyes searching her face. "But I received *your* letter, saying you had decided you did not love me enough to marry me, and commanding that I should not try to see you again ever."

Lorna's lips parted in astonishment.

"But I never wrote you any letter like that, Barry!"

"Then who did write both those letters?"

Both of them answered the question in one word:

"Peter!"

"You would have married me, then, darling?" Barry asked.

"Of course, silly!"

"And"—Barry slipped an experimental arm around her—"do you still love me, now that you're the Queen of Bolaria?"

"But I'm not a queen any longer. Oh, Barry, I want to go home with you!"

Barry caught her to him, and held her as though he feared that Daros's army might at any minute snatch her from him.

Dusk had fallen about them. The moon came out from behind a cloud. And still Barry's car was parked by the roadside. But they were very near the border, now, and safe from Bolarian warfare.

"When I got that letter, saying you wouldn't marry me," Barry explained, "I tried to see you. But when I drove out to your house the servants told me you had suddenly gone abroad. So I started off blindly to search for you. And here I am."

Lorna kissed him.

"Let Daros take the throne if he wants it," she said. "I don't."

"And are you sure you won't miss all the things you have had here, sweetheart?" Barry asked her anxiously.

"*Miss* them? Barry, don't be positively ridiculous. As though I wouldn't rather be your wife than be a queen! As though *any* girl wouldn't!"

"That," Barry demurred, crushing her close in his arms, "doesn't sound reasonable!"

"But wouldn't you rather marry me than be President of the United States?"

"And *how!*" Barry exclaimed fervently.

"Well, then!" said Lorna — which means, as every woman knows: "What's the use of talking any more about it?"

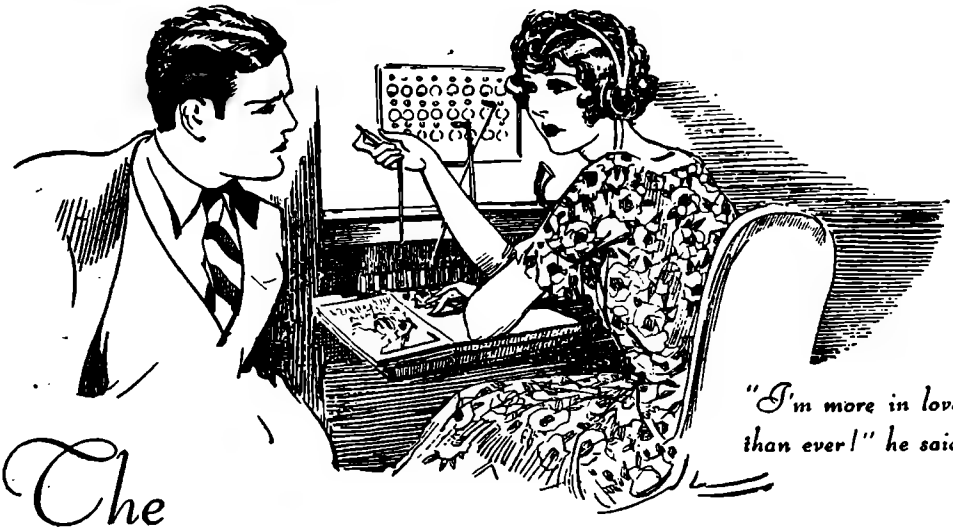
Barry didn't argue the matter further. He looked up at the moon and remarked:

"Do you know, gypsy eyes, that I never expected to appreciate that moon again, or even to feel kindly toward it? It's a wonderful old light, isn't it?"

"Marvelous!" Lorna agreed dreamily. "It's the lovers' lantern, you know, darling."

"Shall we let it guide us, then?" Barry asked, smiling down at her. "Shall I start the car, your majesty, and keep right on going until we find a minister who can change the Queen of Bolaria into plain Mrs. Barry Shayne?"

"Oh, yes!" said the once arrogant monarch. "Let's find that miracle man!"



"I'm more in love than ever!" he said

The Boy Next Door

Her eyes were fixed upon a star, glittering with the promise of dreams fulfilled. No wonder she failed to see the miracle near at hand!

By Helen Franklin

BY the time Evelyn had finished waving her handkerchief at the departing train she was ready to use it for something else. She had all she could do to keep the tears, that had dammed along her shining lower lids, from overflowing. Gee, she felt lonesome!

Anne and Dot and Ruth—the girls with whom she'd grown almost from babyhood, her "gang" all through high school—were going east to college. They'd be roommates. What gay times they'd have together, just as they'd had in high school; but in a bigger—much bigger—way. For they were bound for one of the largest and finest co-ed universities in the East.

"Oh, gang!" thought Evelyn, standing there alone on the station platform. "If only Dad had a little more money. All I've got to look forward to is a disgusting old switchboard job here in Chestervale and the company of boys like Hartley Ferris, left around town when the real up-and-coming fellows leave for college."

The departure of the girls ended Evelyn's dream. All four had planned oh, for so many years, to go to the

same college and share the same suite. In high school they had been only schoolmates. But over East, why, they'd be *roommates!* They had even gone so far as to reserve the dormitory suite, when Evelyn's father's small business had failed and removed all possibility of Evelyn's going to college.

Well, maybe next year she'd be able to go. But the sad part of it was that she felt so alone now in Chestervale. Nearly everybody in town whom she cared anything about would be away at school until Christmas. It would be a dreary winter for Evelyn, too dreary to think about right now.

She crossed the station platform and emerged on the sunlit sidewalk. She'd have to hurry back to the office; her luncheon hour was almost over.

As her smartly clicking heels took her along Broad Street toward the Casson Motor Sales Company, she was aware of the glances of many boys. She spoke to one or two whom she happened to know.

Within half a dozen blocks of her office, an ancient and querulous Ford car tobogganed to the curb just in front of her, and the door nearer her snapped open. The driver sat looking at her over his shoulder and grinning.

HARTLEY FERRIS, the boy next door. They had graduated in the same class from high school. They had struggled for the same prizes in grammar school. They had labored over and taken pride in the same snowmen.

"Hurry up, Ev," said Hartley. "I haven't got all day."

Evelyn got in with about as much graciousness and ceremony as she'd expend in boarding a street car.

"What're you doing, Hartley, that you haven't got all day? Hanging around Graves's drug store drinking choc-malts?"

"No. I'm looking for a job."

"Hurray!" said Evelyn. "Hartley Ferris is going to work!"

"Shut up!" said Hartley, chivalrously. "Is it my fault that I couldn't get a job all summer with the college fellows home and working around town? We fellows had to wait until they quit to go back to school before anybody would hire us."

"Hartley Ferris, you're no good or you'd be going to college yourself, instead of sticking around a town like Chestervale. You haven't any ambition at all. Look at Jimmie Egan and Frank Costerman, going to Harvard! And you're perfectly satisfied to get yourself some kind of a little twenty dollar a week job in Chestervale, and dub along here for the rest of your life."

Evelyn didn't know whether Hartley's father could afford to send him to college or not, but she imagined he could. Hartley was just lazy, that was all.

Hartley's tanned and usually amiable face darkened. There were times when he startled you with his seriousness.

"I want to go into business," he said. "What's the use of going to somewhere to college and wasting four years learning a lot of theories, when you can go right out now and get the actual experience?" You could tell from the self-conscious way he spoke that Hartley was merely quoting.

"Any young fellow who can, ought to go to college," Evelyn said, stubbornly, and got ready to open the door for herself as they approached her office.

Hartley didn't attempt to argue further.

"Are they taking on any men in

your place—salesmen?" he asked, as Evelyn was getting out of the car.

She turned, slammed the door, and looked him up and down. You could treat the boy next door as you wouldn't treat any one else. You just couldn't hurt him anyhow, no matter what you did.

"Say! If they take on any men in our place, they have to be *men!*"

Hartley seemed still a child to Evelyn.

"Yeah?" said Hartley. "Well, if I don't get a job where I'm going for this appointment, I'm coming back here. I can sell cars—why not?"

"Don't waste your time coming to us," Evelyn advised him.

IT was about a quarter to three when Hartley came into the Casson salesrooms, climbed the stairs to the balcony—where the offices were located—and with a grin on his face asked Evelyn to announce to Mr. Casson that Mr. Ferris was outside.

"Mr. Casson is very busy," said Evelyn.

"I'll wait," said Hartley.

"I'm sure it won't do any good," said Evelyn, "because this is our dull season coming on. Even the regular salesmen hardly turn over any business after the fall term begins."

"I'll wait," said Hartley, taking a seat.

After a while Evvie announced him, her voice and manner plainly speaking her lordly annoyance. "It's about a job," she added, when she had given his name to Mr. Casson.

She pulled the plug with a look of shy triumph. "He says come around to-morrow," she reported to Hartley.

Hartley pretended indifference. "I think I'll sit here until Mr. Casson comes out." he said. "I might as well see him while I'm here. I might have a big appointment to-morrow."

Evelyn made her mouth into an exasperated button, and started shuffling a stack of sales reports which had been given to her to sort.

Hartley didn't have long to wait. He had been there probably fifteen minutes when Mr. Casson came out of his private office and went to the rail of the balcony. He was just about to open his mouth to call one of the salesmen on the lower floor when Hartley said:

"Oh, Mr. Casson! Can I speak to you a moment?"

Mr. Casson was a hard-boiled, silver-templed business man. But he was not sure that Hartley might not be a customer, or the son of a customer. So he came closer.

"What's on your mind, young man?"

"I'm looking for a job, Mr. Casson. I can drive a car, and I'd like to ask you if you wouldn't take me on as salesman."

"Sorry," said Mr. Casson abruptly. "I am not taking anybody on at this time of the year."

"But how about the used car department?" Hartley questioned. "I think I could sell those things. I've got an idea I could sell a lot of them among the mill people down in the Potts Hollow section."

Mr. Casson looked at him queerly, then turned away.

"Sorry," he said. "There's nothing in that department right now."

But Hartley persisted: "Well, maybe you've got something in the service department, Mr. Casson. I wouldn't mind working out in the shop."

With that Mr. Casson's curiosity seemed to be aroused.

"Step inside a minute, and I'll talk to you." he said.

Hartley followed him delightedly. When he reappeared he had a job.

"He said he'd start me as a service salesman—that's taking care of the customers who bring their cars into the shop for repairs—then the next step is junior salesman, selling used cars. Then, if I make good he'll make me a regular salesman, I suppose," Hartley reported to Evelyn.

But Evelyn didn't attempt to match his enthusiasm. She was quite sure that Hartley Ferris wasn't going to amount to much. A boy who didn't have the ambition to go to college like other fellows!

"You'll be lucky if you last as a service salesman," said Evelyn, and pivoted around on her stool.

THE first few days that Hartley was on his new job he drove Evelyn home from work every evening. He had to go to work a half hour earlier than the office force, so they didn't meet in the morning. To Evelyn he looked worried. Part of his job was to learn a lot of "operation numbers" necessary to the cashier's bookkeeping. Every repair job had an operation number. He seemed to be having a time of it, learning them all.

Evelyn saw him hanging around his front porch each evening studying a paper. He probably had a lot of the numbers written out. He was trying hard enough, but Evelyn gave him two weeks on the service salesman job. Hartley Ferris was too lazy to get very far.

By the end of the week, however, his worried look had disappeared, and the service manager was very well pleased with his work. In fact Evelyn heard the service manager telling Mr. Casson himself that the customers seemed to be taking to the new fellow. "He's got a nice personality," he reported, "and that's what they like."

There was another boy in the service department, however, who interested Evelyn more than Hartley Ferris. That was Walter Pierce, the timekeeper. He and Evelyn had run into each other once or twice at noon and had lunched together.

Of course he wasn't as nice as the boys Evelyn used to be friends with when she and Anne and Dot and Ruth were having beaux together. Walter wasn't the same type. But all those boys were away at college now, and Walter Pierce, as far as Evelyn was concerned, was the only really nice boy left in Chestervale.

He was a graduate of a business school in another part of the State, and he and another fellow had an apartment in town. Walter Pierce invited Evelyn to a party at the apartment the Saturday after Hartley Ferris joined the Casson organization, and he mentioned most of the people who were going to be there—none of whom Evelyn knew. He didn't mention Hartley Ferris.

When Evelyn came into the apartment with Walter, Hartley was dancing with a girl who had a very close shingle and was wearing too much lipstick. He seemed to be having a perfectly marvelous time. That is, until he saw Evelyn. Then, quite suddenly, his relish for the party seemed to fade.

In a very few minutes he managed to get a dance with her, and maneuvered her into the tiny foyer, where a measure of privacy was possible.

"What the deuce are you doing at a party like this?" he asked severely.

Evelyn had felt immediately on entering the apartment that she wasn't going to enjoy herself. It was a different crowd, somehow. Too much

jazz and foolishness. And Walter Pierce was acting absolutely silly. He thought he was funny doing that imitation of a mammy singer. But:

"What are *you* doing here?" she countered.

"Why—it's different with me," said Hartley. "I just dropped in because I didn't know what else to do with myself. But you—I don't like to see you at a party like this, Ev."

"Silly! You boys are all alike. You seem to think that it's all right for you to be as careless as you want to, but girls should never have any fun!"

Hartley was nonplussed. "That isn't it at all. People don't pay much attention who a fellow goes with, as long as he doesn't join a stick-up mob. But in a town the size of Chestervale, a girl has to be mighty careful."

THERE was something in Hartley's cautioning—merely because he was the boy next door, perhaps—that challenged Evelyn. It made her stubborn and inclined to show off.

"That may be so, Hartley—but I'm staying right here and having some fun!"

"But it isn't the right crowd, Ev," Hartley objected, rather desperately. "They're — well, they're not nice enough for you."

"Don't try to big brother me! I'm staying right here, and if you don't start to dance this minute, Hartley Ferris, I'm looking for another partner."

Hartley Ferris gazed down at her a full minute, looking as though he'd like to spank her. Then he caught her to him rather breath-takingly as the music commenced.

Evelyn's eyes were bright with triumph. Hartley Ferris wasn't going to tell *her* what to do! Still, as the party grew more intimate she noticed that the guests were slipping out to the kitchen in pairs, turning the light out, and remaining there for periods of different duration. That gave her a rather insecure feeling, a faint nausea of uneasiness.

When Walter Pierce sat down in the living room, drew her down on his knee and turned out the lamp over their heads, Evelyn knew a different rebellion.

She quickly turned the light on again and noticed that Hartley, who was dancing with one of the girls, was not missing a thing.

"Aw, how about a little kiss, baby?" said Walter. "How much more time are we gonna waste? Ain't it about time you started to be nice to me?"

"Is this your idea of being nice to *me*, Walter?"

Walter didn't seem to have any answer for that. "Aw, let's dance then," he said, ill-naturedly. Evelyn danced with him willingly enough, but she was sure that after to-night she didn't want to see any more of Walter.

And Walter, on his part, was perfectly willing to relinquish her when Hartley Ferris cut in a few minutes later.

"What did I tell you?" Hartley murmured.

"Now, *please*, Hartley—don't be a turnip!"

"Oh, I didn't mean to be *wise*, Ev," Hartley apologized quickly. "But you wouldn't believe me when I tried to tell you that if you stuck around here somebody would embarrass you. Listen. Why don't you and I slip out of here, and I'll drive you home?"

Evelyn didn't say anything. To consent would be to give in to Hartley Ferris. Yet she certainly didn't want to stay there if Hartley left!

"Can we slip out without attracting too much attention?" she asked. "We don't want to be accused of breaking up the party."

"They've all been going out and up on the roof," said Hartley. "If we leave together, they'll think that's where we're going. You can explain to Walter to-morrow."

THE moon was high as they rode along.

"It's too early to go right home," said Hartley. "Shall we take a ride out by the reservoir?"

The road around the reservoir was the Lovers' Lane of Chestervale. But naturally Evelyn didn't think of it in that connection when riding with Hartley Ferris.

"Yes. I'd like to," she said.

Hartley stopped at a small roadside stand and bought hot dogs. Then they parked the car facing the water, which resembled hammered silver in the moonlight. Something seemed to steal into them from the night. The tall trees hushed the wind, jousting softly and whispering. Water and star-flaked sky were one in beauty and mystery.

When Hartley Ferris said, "Gee, Ev, don't you ever have a tender moment for me?" it was rather startling. Hartley looked embarrassed after he said it.

"What do you mean, Hartley?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's hard to put it into words," he murmured in a truly vibrant and disturbing voice, "but there are times when I feel I've just *got* to tell you that you're the dearest girl on earth—and this is one of them!"

He stopped. They looked at each other, timidly. Nothing happened.

He went on:

"There are times when I'm peeved with you, of *course;* but those are the times when you treat me just as though—well, the way you'd be likely to treat the boy next door who'd grown up with you, I suppose. Trouble is you're too terribly used to me. Familiarity has made me seem pretty unimportant. Sometimes I guess you forget I have feelings. But I'd never be harsh with you if you'd be really nice to me once in a while."

HARTLEY had never seemed so shy—yes, and dear—as he did, murmuring that. Evelyn wanted to laugh with a kind of delight, and yet she had a panicky feeling, too. Who wouldn't? Hartley really was sweet, and she'd always liked him—in a way. But you got kind of careless with some one you knew so well.

Too bad Hartley wasn't the type to amount to anything!

"Aw, Hartley!" Evelyn said, chiding. "You *know* I think you're just the nicest boy. Don't mind me. I guess we *have* got quite used to each other in nineteen years, huh?"

Evelyn covered his hand with her own. She had intended to be merely reassuring, but presently Hartley was caressing the hand she gave him.

He drew her closer.

"Evvie," he said. "I don't know why I picked to-night to tell you. I didn't think I'd *ever* tell you, and I know you'll think I'm a boob—but for the longest time now, I've wanted to love—you—and I—?"

Evvie drew off, and laughter crinkled the corners of her eyes.

"Why, Hartley—you're fooling! In love—you—and I—"

But the smile faded from her lips as she recognized the deep sincerity in Hartley's eyes.

"Oh, dear! I don't know what to

say to you, Hartley. You—you'd better drive me home. I must think it over. I'm just—stunned."

Hartley sat up, sighed, and fingered the steering wheel self-consciously. "I knew you would be," he said.

They saw each other again about ten o'clock the next morning. Evelyn had been positively worried as to how she was going to face him. It was embarrassing to have a boy whom you would just never *think* of falling in love with

"You never give me a chance. Won't you be nice to me once in a while?"

Evvie knew he felt sorry he had told her. But somehow, she had no reaction but a feeling of tenderness for him. Yet she wasn't really thrilled or anything. Just surprised and strangely stirred to learn that a boy was thinking about her in just that way.

They parted at Evelyn's gate no more dramatically than they had parted on many another occasion.

suddenly announce that he was in love with you; particularly embarrassing when you had to face him every day!

But as he came up the stairs to the office, Evelyn could see that he was grinning up at her. In a flashback of memory Evelyn saw him coming through her gate as a kid, wearing the same expression and saying "How about a game of Red Rover?" She

smiled at the thought and all self-consciousness fled.

"MORNING, Evvie," said Hartley. He was wearing a new suit and looked for all the world like a young business executive. It would hardly have seemed out of place if he had suddenly ordered her to take some dictation.

"Is the Big Boy in? I've got a swell scheme to make some money for the company. I'll bet after I tip him off to this he'll make me a junior salesman, sure."

"He's not in yet."

"Well, when he does come in," said Hartley, "give me a ring."

It seemed to Evelyn that the boy was getting too cocky. He'd probably talk himself out of his little job if he wasn't careful. But she promised to call him.

As he started for the stairs, he turned back. Leaning over the switchboard, he whispered to her:

"I thought it over, just as you suggested, and I'm more in love than ever. And what's more, I'm not going to try to hide it any longer."

Evelyn looked up at him. He turned, and, whistling ostentatiously, started down the stairs.

During the morning Hartley returned with one of the sales department record cards—used in reporting on prospects. Having an idle moment, he filled it in and gave it to Evelyn.

"As long as I've got to sell myself to you, I might as well make out a report, too," he said lightly—and walked away leaving her holding the slip.

It read:

Prospect: Evelyn Blake.
Salesman: Hartley Ferris.
First Call: Prospect taken by surprise. Afraid she's looking for a better model. Probably doesn't like the domestic product. But confident I can sell her.
Second Call: Still confident this morning. Prospect being rather sweet to me.
Third Call: Haven't made it yet. But expect to see Prospect to-night.
Remarks: I love you! Oh, honey—and how!
Approved: Emphatically—Hartley Ferris.

EVELYN couldn't help but be amused. Isn't he a nut! she thought to herself. But just then two trunk line calls came in at once, and she laid the slip down on her desk.

While she was answering the second call Mr. Casson came in and stood at the switchboard, waiting to ask for messages. If Evelyn had thought, she would have snatched the slip and either destroyed it or put it away somewhere. But she had forgotten it for the moment.

Mr. Casson's eye was caught by the name in the salesman's space. He picked up the slip curiously and read it.

He looked anything but pleased.

"Has that young sap been hanging around you instead of looking after the customers?" he demanded of Evelyn.

"No, sir!" said Evelyn. "He's been upstairs twice this morning, that's all. He—he was looking for you, Mr. Casson."

Casson started for his office, waving the slip in his hand.

"I'll talk to him!" he said violently. "Get hold of him. Tell him I want to see him right away!"

Trembling for Hartley, Evelyn called him.

He came up the stairs looking as though he felt there was something in the air, but he smiled at sight of Evelyn. "He probably wants to give me a raise," he murmured to her as he passed the switchboard.

Seven minutes later, he came out looking not so cocky. Evelyn knew he was fired the minute she saw his face. He looked hurt, and surprised, and not a little downhearted.

Evelyn didn't know it, but there was as much misery in her eyes as she looked at him, as in his. She felt terribly sorry for him.

But Hartley gave her a brief look, in which there was almost as much surprise as resentment, then walked downstairs without a word.

"He thinks I handed that slip to the boss!" Evelyn thought to herself, and became quite annoyed with Hartley Ferris. "Why—why, he ought to know me better than that!"

But there was no chance to explain.

Evelyn went to Graves's drug store for lunch. That was where Hartley used to hang out when he wasn't working. She had to let him know that she hadn't given that slip to the boss.

Hartley looked up from his table away in back, where he sat with a half-consumed drink before him. Having seen her, he immediately looked away. The store was crowded, and Evelyn didn't want any kind of a scene—even a small one. So she took a seat at the fountain, ordered a sandwich, and was able to watch Hartley in the fountain mirror as she ate it.

Every few minutes he raised his eyes and looked in her direction. If he noticed her regarding his reflection, he immediately found something else to look at. There was no question about his being peeved.

EVELYN finally got up her courage, however, and approached him, smiling uncertainly. She said in a low, confidential tone which was meant to convey sympathy:

"Did you get fired, Hartley?"

Hartley looked at her in amazement, then became sarcastic.

"Fired! No, Casson took me into the firm as a partner!"

He began to suck on his soda viciously.

"I'm sorry, Hartley," Evelyn said.

"You are, eh! Look here, Ev, don't try to work both ends against the middle! I've been sitting here thinking things over ever since I left Casson's this morning, and I've begun to get some sense. I'm through wasting my time thinking about girls — *any* girl. You never wanted to see me in Casson's. You tried to talk me out of it and then you must have been sore because I stuck and got a job."

"Why, Hartley! Your imagination is—"

"Oh, don't tell me!" Hartley seemed to keep his voice in the lower register with an effort. "I know what you think about me. You think that just because I didn't go to college like the other fellows I'm no good. Well, it may interest you to know that I wanted to go to college just as badly as anybody else, but my Dad wasn't able to send me this year! I was too proud to let anybody know. But I'm not proud any longer! Pride keeps you from working hard—and I've made up my mind that from now on I'm going to *work!* Before the end of this week I'll have my job back in Casson's!"

Evelyn couldn't seem to be anything but annoyed with him. "Don't be foolish! Casson will never give you your job back."

Hartley's eyes blazed as though she had challenged him.

"No? Listen. What I wanted to see Casson about this morning was an idea that would have done a whole lot to help that organization. Do you know what a winterfront is? It's a device to

put in front of your radiator, and it opens and closes like a shutter, to keep the radiator from freezing in cold weather. It's early to start selling them, but it would have been my job to sell them when the season started.

"There's a new chain bakery opening here and they bought a fleet of trucks from us—er—from Casson's rather. I was going to propose to Mr. Casson that he equip the whole fleet with winterfronts, either free or at cost, and announce in his daily newspaper advertising that this little act was a welcome to the new enterprise.

"Do you see what that would do? It would bring Casson a lot of public gratitude, a letter of thanks from the Chamber of Commerce, and a lot of public praise at the Rotary Club weekly luncheon, just so much advertising. But since he wouldn't let me talk to him about it, I'm going out to see this new firm, and tell them I can get them a special reduction on winterfronts if they buy right now and place an order for the whole fleet. If I put it across we'll see whether Casson gives me my job back or not!"

Evelyn stood up. She didn't think much of the idea, and somehow she couldn't say what she had come to say. Hartley was altogether too sure of himself. She just couldn't humble herself in any way whatever to a boy like that.

Let him think what he wants to, she decided at last, snootily—and expressing a curt wish that he make his deal, she left him, her nose decidedly up in the air.

SHORTLY before five o'clock Hartley was in the office. His expression was determined, and Evelyn couldn't tell by looking at him what to expect next. He asked to be announced to Mr. Casson. Mr. Casson listened to the announcement on the phone, said "I have nothing to say," and hung up.

Hartley, instead of withdrawing, took a seat. He knew that Mr. Casson would be leaving his office in a very few minutes.

When Casson came out he was properly surprised to find Hartley waiting for him.

"I thought I told you you were through," said Casson. "What are you hanging around here for?"

"I'm not hanging around, Mr. Casson," said Hartley, and pulled a paper out of his pocket. "I've got an order for a dozen winterfronts from the Hostess Bakery people, and I thought I'd bring it in. You wouldn't like me to take it to one of your competitors, would you?"

Casson regarded him in amazement. "But it's too early for winterfronts—nobody's buying them yet!"

"Well, here's the order! I told them you'd give them a discount for cash."

Casson took the order and read it. Then he turned around and started back to his office.

"Come in here," he said to Hartley.

The din of typewriters having ceased, and the door to the private office being open, Evelyn could hear them talking.

Hartley explained his idea and the boss seemed to think more highly of it than Evelyn had.

"I'll put you back on the pay roll and give you a raise, Ferris," he said finally.

"Not as service salesman," said Hartley stubbornly. "I want to get on the junior sales staff."

"But this is the worst time," said Casson. "In the service department

you'll get a salary. On the junior sales staff you may not make a nickel all winter."

"I'll make money!" said Hartley. "I've still got an idea I can sell a lot of used cars to the mill people over in the Potts Hollow section."

"All right," Casson agreed at last. "Monday you start selling used cars. Junk that thing you drive around in. I'll give you a good used car and gas and oil, and put you on commission."

"Thank you, Mr. Casson," said Hartley, and came out of the office smiling.

He went by Evelyn as though she were transparent and invisible.

SAVE for a few details, the records of the Casson Motor Sales Company could tell the rest of the story. There are two blackboards hanging in the office, and the salesmen's names, with their sales, are kept chalked up on them, in the order of ranking. Before Christmas Evelyn was tired of looking at Hartley Ferris's name at the top of the junior sales list. He *was* working! She never saw him around in the evening any more. Having picked a territory where everybody worked hard, he merely looked up prospects during the day and closed all his sales at night. Evelyn's relations with him were now confined to slight nods and rather forced hellos.

She saw him at a few parties during the Christmas season, when the gang got home from college, but he didn't ask her to dance, and as soon as the gay two weeks were over he was back working evenings as hard as ever.

The Easter season wasn't what the Christmas season had been—fewer of Evelyn's friends left the campus. Shortly after Easter Hartley was promoted to the main sales force, given a brand new sedan, and immediately jumped from first rank on the junior sales force to first rank on the "front" force. His energy and tenacity were the talk of everybody in the office.

It got so that by the time Anne and Dot and Ruth were back in Chestervale, every third person who entered the Casson sales rooms asked for Mr. Ferris. And Hartley, instead of being the rather slow, retiring boy he had been the previous summer, had developed into a smartly dressed executive with a charming smile for every one—except Evelyn. Her he continued to treat coldly.

The time came when Evelyn began to feel it keenly.

WHO would have thought the time would *ever* come when Evelyn would watch Hartley Ferris's goings and comings from behind her bedroom curtains and sigh over his indifference?

"What's the matter, Evvie ol' hon?" Anne asked her, in the presence of Ruth and Dot. "You don't seem to have the ole steam. Gosh, I should think you'd be so happy over the prospect of U next year that you'd be turning handsprings in the streets."

"Oh, don't think I'm not happy to be going back with you girls, even though I *have* lost a year. I—I guess it's just this town. I need a rest from Chestervale."

"Chestervale!" said Dot, with characteristic frankness. "Why not admit, Evvie, that it's Hartley Ferris who's on your mind?"

"But it isn't!" said Evvie, pretending to be exasperated.

The girls all laughed. It was surprising how much they knew, despite the fact that they had been away for months.

"Well, I just heard to-day," Ruth said, "that Hartley is going to be at the university with us next year. He's already taken a suite with one of the boys in Mendon Hall."

"You don't mean he's going to leave Casson's!"

"Must be," said Ruth.

And Hartley did. He and Evelyn, to their mutual surprise, left on the same day.

The college crowd had a dance at Hilltop Country Club the Saturday night before the new term opened. Anne and Dot and Ruth had boys calling for them, but Evelyn had no idea who was to be her partner—the girls had said they would take care of her, and provide somebody nice—until the bell rang Saturday evening.

Evelyn opened the door. Her little red button-mouth fell open. Hartley Ferris!

"He's going to say 'How about a game of Red Rover?'" was Evelyn's fantastic thought.

What he did say was, "Going to the party, Ev?"

"Why—why, yes," Evelyn stammered. "But come in. The girls are going to call for me any minute."

"No, they're not," said Hartley. "I just phoned them and told them I was taking care of you. They said it was all right."

"Oh, they did!"

"Yes," Hartley assured her. "And if you don't mind I'd rather not come in. Look, it's nice and dark down at that end of the porch. Come on over and sit in the swing, I want to talk to you."

Evelyn followed him to the porch swing. She had a feeling that something tremendous was going to happen —*had* happened. It was good that the porch was dark.

"I just had dinner with the Cassons," Hartley told her as they swung gently back of the ivy-covered trellis, "and I came right over here afterward. Why didn't you tell me it was an accident when Casson found that crazy prospect report I filled in?"

"Because you should have known!" said Evelyn promptly. "And because you were too much of a smarty!"

"I know I was a smarty," Hartley admitted. "A dumb one! When Mr. Casson started to laugh at dinner tonight and let it out how he'd picked up that slip by accident I almost fell over. For the longest time I've been thinking the most unkind thoughts about you—and yet I went right on being in love with you, Evvie, honest! You can imagine what a time I had keeping my thoughts straight, though, feeling resentful a good part of the time, and yet not able to look at you without thinking how sweet you were, and how much I wanted you. Forgive me, Evvie dear—won't you? I think we were both just obstinate, and wouldn't make any concessions to each other—just because we happened to live next door and knew one another so well."

"But we didn't know each other as well as we thought—or as well as we should have," said Evelyn, twining her fingers in those of the boy next door, "or it would never have happened like that."

"That's true," Hartley agreed, taking her in his arms. He held her desperately close, kissing her repeatedly on the mouth that so much resembled a tiny red button.

"I love you, Evvie," he told her over and over, and this time Evelyn *was* thrilled. "Let's plan to be married on commencement day, huh?"

"Oh, Hartley honey, won't it be marvelous to look forward to!"

"It is a present to you. Please take it!"

When Dreams Come True

The dangerous rapids of jealousy and deceit threatened destruction, but she held fast to her faith in love and came at last to the Harbor of Heart's Desire

By Ruby LaVerte Thompson

LOVINGLY, hungrily, Joy's slender white fingers felt their way through the soft, iridescent ripples of the newest model. Oh, the exquisiteness of it! Yards and yards of tulle, tumbling riotously from the tight little opalescent waist, in palest shades of coral and silver, with here and there a hint of turquoise and amethyst.

It was beautiful, so beautiful that Joy felt a lump rise in her soft, young throat whenever she looked at it. This frock was meant for her, Joy Lovelace; she just knew it. Something in the newest model, warm, pulsating, alive, seemed to be saying to her: "Take me! I am yours! No one else must ever wear me!"

If only she had money—lots of it! But a salesgirl cannot be expected to purchase ninety-seven-fifty models; not if she saves forever. And Joy had no desire to save forever; she wanted that creation now, to wear to-night at the dance of dances, when big, wealthy Jim Brent entertained the employees of the Emporium at Brentwood, his own palatial home.

It was to be a gala affair, given in honor of the successful launching of his first business venture. Of course, she could have the dress charged; some of the girls did that. But no, the idea was ridiculous; at her salary, it would take weeks and weeks to pay for it.

And that wasn't considering the cost of the silver slippers—nothing else would do—and stockings, and an appropriate wrap. Gracious, what was she thinking of, anyhow?

Joy swallowed hard and blinked back the tears that seemed, perversely, determined to force themselves into her lovely, blue-black eyes. She gave a courageous little pat to the almost jet-like curls that were tightly crinkled about her head. She wouldn't act like a baby, although she did want the newest model more than anything else in the world—almost.

There was a second, a greater desire —more unattainable than the first— and Joy's flushed, velvety cheeks and shining eyes told their own story only too plainly.

She did so want Mr. Brent to see her at her best to-night!

"I think," said a laughing voice behind her, "that we have found a name for this new model. It shall be known, henceforth, as the 'Joy Model.'"

If Joy's cheeks were flushed before, they were actually blazing now. She tried to speak, to make her voice sound natural, but only succeeded in making a confused, inarticulate reply. He had startled her so—and he was so handsome! She just knew that Mr. Brent was the dearest and best man in the world. But she must never let him know this secret of hers; he—well, he didn't fit in with her ordinary little world.

He was speaking again, his gray eyes alight with frank admiration.

"Miss Lovelace, to-morrow will be your birthday, won't it?"

"Why—why, yes, Mr. Brent. How did you know?"

"The usual little bird," he teased. "No, frankly, Miss Lovelace, I heard one of the girls mention it. And I wish you'd accept this little dress—you seem to have taken such a fancy to it —as a—as a—" Jim Brent, too, was stammering now. "Well, anyhow," he blurted. "This model isn't suited to anybody except you! Please take it!"

JOY stood stock-still, numbed, frozen. All the color was drained from her lovely face, leaving it pitifully white and drawn.

Oh—to have this happen! Just as Evelyn Hayden had insinuated yesterday! Evelyn had been right, although her cutting remarks had seered Joy's very soul. She had been Mr. Brent's friend for many years; she knew him.

Joy winced as again she heard Evelyn's cold voice informing her—

for no apparent reason—that Jim Brent was not to be trusted with shop-girls; that she felt it her duty to warn Joy, the prettiest girl in the establishment, that he probably would try to curry favor with her by means of gifts and compliments.

Joy held her little head very high. All the blue had left her eyes; they were black now, black, as she stared straight ahead and answered through compressed lips, her voice dead, lifeless:

"Very kind of you, Mr. Brent, but —but I really couldn't accept it!"

"Why, Miss Lovelace! Joy—"

Jim Brent took a quick, impulsive step forward.

"Telephone, Mr. Brent!"

A long pause, then Jim nodded stiffly. "I think you have misunderstood me, Miss Lovelace. May I speak to you later?"

Silently Joy nodded. What did it matter, anyhow? What did anything matter?

"Well, Joy Lovelace! Of all the prize dumb doras!"

Red-haired Sadie Yount fairly leaped at her from behind a rack of dresses.

"Honest, kid, if you was in earnest, refusin' that swell bunch of prettiness, why, you belong in a squirrel cage with some of the other nuts! You sure do! And I thought you had some romance in you! And some sense!"

"Please, please, Sadie, don't! Somebody'll hear you!"

"Somebody oughtta hear me—only there's nobody near! Too soon after lunch for customers. Anyhow, look here, kid! Here the richest guy in the whole country, and the swellest boss, too, for that matter, goes plumb zippy over you, and—"

"Please, Sadie—"

"And you won't even let him give you one measly little old dress, one you're wild about! Just let him make me such an offer, baby! Just let him try it! The Emporium'll be short one classy glad-rag, I'm telling the world!"

The dimples were beginning to reappear in Joy's cheeks, and the blue was again creeping back into her dark, long-fringed eyes. Sadie was so funny —and such a dear! Making such a fuss over her troubles!

"You're certainly telling the world, honey, and I wish you wouldn't! I can't accept such expensive gifts from Mr. Brent—truly, I can't!"

"Listen!" Sadie's freckled face fairly radiated indignation. "Here you go and cop off the best catch in town—he's crazy about you, too; anybody with eyes can see it, even that nasty Evelyn Hayden—"

"Please, please, do hush," Joy slipped an affectionate arm about the excited girl's waist. "He'll hear you! You mustn't!"

"I hope he does! She calls herself the Brents' house guest! Their house cat, if you ask me! She's just as jealous of you as she can be—and that's why she pulled that crack about him yesterday! Oh, I heard her all right, and that's why you did the grand duchess just now, too! Played right into her hands! You're a regular little fool, Joy Lovelace!"

"Maybe I am, Sadie; maybe I am!"

Joy's face had suddenly become grave, thoughtful. Was Sadie, perhaps, right? Did Evelyn say those things yesterday with malicious intent? If so, she had succeeded very well indeed.

Sadie was speaking again.

"And, another thing, Joy—s-h-h-h! Here comes a customer, one o' the stylish stouts. I'll take her—you stay here. And see if you can't act a little

less like a ninny when Mr. Brent comes back—if he does!" she finished darkly.

BUT Jim Brent was already approaching, smiling apologetically.

"Please, Miss Lovelace, accept my deepest apologies! I was just called down again—by my mother. She telephoned to say that she and our guest, Miss Hayden, were coming down to select some things from stock, and she made a special request that you be free to wait on them. I told her I didn't know whether or not you would care to do it—that I had apparently just made you very angry. And my mother—after I explained my boner—told me plenty! I'm awfully sorry, Miss Lovelace, and you were right. Are we friends again?"

Joy's face was alight with eager rapture as she placed her soft, warm fingers impulsively within his strong grasp. "It's nice of you to understand. I—I didn't mean to appear unappreciative, really, Mr. Brent, and—and thank you!"

"And that's that!" Jim smiled down at her, holding her hand—so it seemed to Joy—an unnecessarily long time. "Now, just to prove you've forgiven me, how many dances are you going to save for me to-night?"

"As many as you want—perhaps!" Her answering smile, shy and sweet, flashed bewitchingly up at him. "Mr. Brent, here—here come some customers!"

"Oh, bother the customers! Anyhow, that's a promise!"

Joy's heart was singing a little tune as she fairly danced to meet the group of women who approached. Life was good; so good. She was going to make sales—lots of them—for Jim Brent.

"Miss Lovelace!"

Joy paused, a chill of apprehension striking to her very soul.

She knew that voice—it was the voice of Evelyn Hayden. Why did she have to appear now, of all times? It meant that she would have to face another ordeal, a greater one, perhaps, than that of yesterday. Evelyn seemed to delight in wounding her, in sending little darts of biting sarcasm in her direction at every opportunity.

She turned to face a girl, slender, about her own size, with a face of such beauty that Joy could scarcely repress a shudder. Somehow, Evelyn Hayden always affected her this way. Whether it was because of the steely dislike reflected in the beautiful blue eyes, or the sneering lips, drawn tightly like a cruel, red gash in her dead-white face, Joy never knew. Attractive? Certainly! Evelyn was deadly attractive and icily, classically beautiful.

"Miss Lovelace!" Her cold, even tones slashed like a thin, sharp knife at Joy's already frayed nerves. "You are to show us some of your new models!"

Anger surged in Joy's breast at the peremptory note of command. A hot reply rose to her lips, but she checked herself. Evelyn Hayden was Jim Brent's guest; she must treat her as such—for his sake. Too, his mother was approaching, and Joy loved this sweet-faced, white-haired, gentle old lady. Not for anything in the world would she give her cause for embarrassment.

"Joy, dear," Mrs. Brent greeted her. "You know I never can call you anything but Joy—you are, I think, the very personification of your name. Nobody ever seems to know just what a tiresome old lady wants excepting you, dear, and I wonder if the other girls can't take care of those regular

customers for a little while—that is, if you don't mind."

"I'd love to, Mrs. Brent," Joy said, impulsively. "I'd rather wait on you than—than anybody."

What did Evelyn's barbed sarcasm matter—after this?

THE next hour was filled both with pleasure and with heartache. Mrs. Brent was easily suited, and her kind words and gentle appreciation soothed the raw spots left by Evelyn's edged remarks.

"Really," Evelyn said at last, "you are quite stupid about your stock! Hasn't Jim a single salesgirl with intelligence and taste? The very idea of showing one with my coloring a rose-colored frock!"

"But, Evelyn," Mrs. Brent gently interposed, "you really seem quite difficult to please—and, you know, Jim doesn't keep an unlimited stock. This town isn't large enough to warrant it."

Evelyn turned a dazzling smile upon the older woman. "I'm not criticizing Jim's stock; it's the salesgirl!"

Wearily, Joy turned to Sadie, who stood rearranging some of the nearby racks.

"Sadie!" she called. "Won't you please come here a moment? Can you think of anything else that Miss Hayden might fancy? Anything that isn't on display here?"

"Did you show her that model that came in this morning? The one with the different colors?"

"No—no, I didn't!" Why did Sadie, usually so loyal, suggest the newest model? Surely she must know how much she, Joy, loved it already, and how hard it would be to see Evelyn Hayden, of all people, wearing it.

Trying to conceal the pain that filled her heart, she watched Sadie bring out the coveted bit of apparel. Then her eyes widened with horror as the red-head held the dress up as a shield, and behind it winked broadly, grinningly, at Joy.

"I see!" Evelyn cried triumphantly. "It seems very strange indeed that this girl should forget such a model!"

"Yes, it does," Sadie agreed innocently, "especially when she is so crazy about it herself! Mr. Brent says the dress looks as if it was made for Joy; in fact, he named it 'the Joy Model'!"

Teasingly, Sadie looked at Joy, who stood, white-faced, gazing at her. She felt Evelyn's eyes on her, cold, disdainful.

But Jim's mother saved Joy the agony of making any reply.

"Oh, yes," she smiled, "I believe I've heard something about this little model; Jim told me about it! It's really very lovely, but, Evelyn, I think I like you better in the green."

Evelyn's eyes were merciless as she swept a scornful glance at the "Joy Model."

"Jim is right," she said mockingly. "This model is decidedly well named. A cheap, tawdry affair. Take it back! I have decided to take several frocks out to Brentwood, and decide at my leisure. I'll take this—and this—yes, and this one; it isn't bad; and those four hanging together."

"My dear," Mrs. Brent mildly objected, "you remember the house is being decorated for to-night, and the caterers are probably there now. Of course, it doesn't matter to me, but since you said you weren't really in any hurry, don't you think you'd get a better selection if you waited until to-morrow, when there isn't so much noise and confusion?"

"I have decided to select one from

Jim's Emporium to wear at his dance to-night," Evelyn answered sweetly. "It seems so appropriate. That is, if you don't mind?"

"Of course I don't mind, child, if you don't," the older woman agreed.

Quick as a flash she stuffed the bills into the shabby purse

"And," continued Evelyn, "I think I shall take this girl" — indicating Joy—"with us to model for me. She hasn't any style, but she'll have to do!"

"I'll have to ask Mr. Brent," Joy faltered, pleadingly. "Our rush hour is just about due!"

"I'll see him," Evelyn responded, as she walked swiftly toward the door. "I'm sure it will be all right!"

"I'M sorry, Joy," Mrs. Brent began, as soon as Evelyn had disappeared, "that Miss Hayden has seemed so unreasonable to-day. I don't think that she can be feeling well—she is usually very sweet."

"Oh, I don't mind, really," Joy answered, trying bravely to swallow the lump that was rising in her throat.

"I'm sorry too, kid," someone whispered softly in her ear, and Joy knew that Sadie was filled with remorse at her prank.

With sinking heart Joy watched Evelyn reappear, hanging on to Jim's arm.

"What's this I hear?" Jim grinned. "Is our Emporium beginning to step into the 'live model' class?"

"It was Evelyn's suggestion," his mother said.

"Do you really care to do it, Miss Lovelace?" Jim was looking straight at her now. "Because if you don't it will be quite all right."

Joy was silent for a moment. Then, holding her head high, she looked squarely, proudly into the disdainful eyes of Evelyn Hayden.

"I'm sure it will be a great pleasure," she said, "to serve as Miss Hayden's model. She is very kind."

JOY enjoyed the ride to Brentwood. She loved the beautiful home, with its great spacious grounds and wonderful furnishings. But once inside Evelyn's room she was quickly reminded of the reason for her visit.

As in a dream—a cruel nightmare—she heard Evelyn dismiss her maid, caught the maid's swift glance of pity, and knew that, at last, she was alone with the girl who hated her.

Evelyn was talking, telling her to do something, and it seemed to Joy as if her voice were coming from a great distance. For the first time in her life, Joy was afraid she was going to faint. She mustn't. She would not give way to this feeling of emptiness that was enveloping her! Just what was Evelyn saying? The green? Oh, yes. Here it was.

Mechanically, Joy slipped the gauzy model over her head, and turned toward the long mirror of the dressing table to see if it was adjusted properly. Then she grew tense. There—on the right of the dressing table—Jim Brent's face was smiling up at her. And the inscription—"To My One and Only Sweetheart."

Immovable, white-faced, she continued to stare.

"Well," drawled a mocking voice behind her, "I hope you're satisfied with your reflection! You seem to have fallen in love with it—or is it something else? Perhaps you are admiring the picture of my fiancé?"

Joy felt as if the world had stopped moving. Jim engaged to this girl! But why not? They were old friends, both wealthy; and she, Joy, was only a shop-girl, one of Jim's many employees. She would not let Evelyn know how much her words had wounded; she would carry on to the end.

"Of course," she smiled wistfully at Evelyn, hoping that the other girl would not hear the wild pounding of her heart, "this gown isn't half as becoming to me as it would be to you. I'm sure you would be lovely in it!"

"We-l-l," drawled Evelyn, maddeningly, "it isn't exactly the bar-maid type of gown, I'll admit. And your carriage is so awkward that it is very difficult—but perhaps I was expecting too much."

Then followed an interminable period of putting on dresses, taking them off, putting them on again; walking up and down the room, up and down; complaints about the way she held her head, her hands, and of how she carried herself.

At times, Joy felt that she had come to the length of her endurance. She was tired, so tired, and Evelyn's cruel, merciless voice cut and lashed, cut and lashed—on—and on—and on.

Suddenly, Joy's taskmistress indicated one gown which she had seeming overlooked.

"Let me see the black—the one with the rhinestones."

"Yes, Miss Hayden."

Joy's answer was smooth and even, although she was a seething volcano within. Could she stand this ordeal? Just a little longer—but she was so tired, and her head was throbbing—little stabbing needles of pain—oh, surely, Evelyn could not keep this up indefinitely.

"No, put the dress on me, instead!" Evelyn ordered. "I rather fancy this model—and I'd rather you didn't wear it; one can't be too careful!"

WITH trembling fingers Joy fastened the garment on the now suavely smiling heiress. She longed to strike, to hurt her: she was a devil. The goading was almost beyond her power to bear.

Yet Joy knew that a mutinous scene was exactly the thing for which Evelyn was working. And, once more, she forced herself to be calm, to deafen her ears to the whiplash of that insinuating voice.

"Are you deaf as well as dumb?"

"I—really—I'm sorry, but—I was thinking of something else—and didn't hear!" Joy apologized.

"Of what else were you thinking?" Evelyn's glance swept tauntingly toward the dresser—to the picture of Jim Brent.

Anything, anything, to divert her attention, thought Joy.

"Oh, I was wishing I had something new to wear to-night!"

"Well, why don't you buy that dress you were showing me?"

"It—it's too expensive; it doesn't matter, anyhow."

Evelyn's blue eyes narrowed and a faint smile curled her red lips.

"Go in the next room and bring me that string of diamonds on the table by the bed. If it isn't there, you'll find it in a little box in the table-drawer."

Joy hesitated. Handling Evelyn's valuables was not at all to her liking.

"Well," Evelyn's icy tones goaded her again, "why are you standing there? I haven't all night to decide. I want to see the diamonds with this dress!"

Slowly Joy moved away and disappeared through the door.

Quick as a flash Evelyn whirled to a nearby desk, opened a drawer, jerked forth a handful of crisp, shining new bills, scattered them out and hurriedly dashed ink on them with her desk pen. Next, seizing a blotter, she absorbed the ink, swept up the bills, and, opening Joy's shabby little handbag, crowded the bills inside. The entire business was completed in an incredibly short time.

From the next room came Joy's troubled voice.

"I can't find your diamonds, Miss Hayden."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, my dear. They're right here in the dresser. I had forgotten where I put them. I'm so careless!"

Puzzled, Joy returned to the room. Wholly gone was Evelyn's former manner of insolence and disdain. What had brought about the change? She was speaking in an unusually pleasant tone of voice, and she was smiling as the girl approached.

"I won't take any more of your time, my dear. I'll just keep these dresses and return them in the morning. Mr. Brent won't care, I'm sure."

"No, of course he won't," Joy returned, bewildered.

"And now here's some advice. You'll be a silly little girl if you don't buy that—that 'Joy Model'"—Joy thought Evelyn was going to choke over the name—"whether you can afford it or not. We only live once, you know. The chauffeur is waiting—I told him to call for you at five—and it's past that now. Good-by, Miss Lovelace, and thank you!"

Well, of all things! Evelyn's changed attitude was the most puzzling thing Joy had ever known. It troubled her. But she was tired, dead tired. The store would be a welcome relief after this nerve shattering ordeal. It would be almost closing time, though, before she would reach the store.

JOY leaned back luxuriously in the deep cushions of the car and gave herself over to dreams. Dreams which included a tall, smiling-faced, bronze-haired man, who looked love and admiration into her eyes. She was wearing the newest model, and she knew that she was lovely as she floated, in his arms, to the dim, hazy strains of a waltz. Music, Jim—and love.

With a start, Joy realized that the car had stopped and the chauffeur was opening the door. It had ended—her dream of love. Jim—she dared to-day to call him that in her heart—belonged to another.

Slowly she descended from the beautifully shining car, and started toward the busy doors of the Emporium. Anyhow, he had asked her to save him some dances. To-night would be her night. She was wildly determined to forget to-morrow and the raw realities which it would bring. Perhaps she would buy the dress—have it charged; she had the right to one night of happiness, and she was willing to pay—yes, forever if necessary.

Let's see—perhaps she had enough money to buy the silver slippers. She paused at the door, and opened her purse.

Bills, rolls of them! Stupefied, she gazed at them. Surely, this wasn't her purse! But it was, too! All the rest of the contents were hers. Tentatively, she ran the bills through her fingers.

Where, oh where did they come from? It must be a mistake. She remembered having left her purse for a moment in one of the dressing rooms as she made ready to accompany Evelyn and Mrs. Brent. Some customer must have mistaken it for her own, momentarily, and failing to notice her error, have left the store with her own purse. If this had happened, she could never prove that Joy had the money, and, more than likely, she would think she had lost the bills. That was the only possible explanation, unless—her cheeks flushed crimson.

No, Jim Brent would never do that. It had come the other way. Dared she use it? There was an awful lot of it, more than enough for every extravagance that came to her mind. The "Joy Model," slippers, a wrap—that soft, rose-petal affair, with the silver lining—why, a whole world of beauty lay within her grasp!

Hurriedly, Joy passed through the doors, and to her own department.

Sadie met her in the aisle.

"What is the matter, kid? Scratched up any? Gosh, here I thought they'd bring you in on a stretcher and you come rushing in, looking as if you'd seen Santa Claus!"

Starry-eyed, Joy gazed at Sadie's honest, good-natured face.

"That's just it, Sadie," she breathed. "I've seen—no, I haven't seen him, but he's been here!"

FOR the twentieth time Jim Brent scanned the dance floor with his quick glance. Suddenly he caught his breath. He had just glimpsed a vision, so beautiful that he thought for a moment he must be dreaming. Floating over the floor, like an airy, colorful bit of thistledown, Joy went to meet his mother. Why, she was the loveliest thing he had ever seen or dreamed of. And she was wearing the intriguing "Joy Model."

He started involuntarily toward her, his face eager with anticipation.

"Jim!"

His face showed clearly his disappointment at this interruption as he looked into the eyes of Evelyn Hayden, who was tugging at his arm.

"Jim, I must see you immediately; it's most important!"

"Just a minute, Evelyn. Some guests have arrived and I must meet them."

"Yes!" For an instant, anger flamed in her white face, but was quickly repressed. "Jim, one of your guests is a thief! She's wearing a dress purchased with stolen money — my money!"

"Evelyn!" Jim said, sternly. "You don't know what you're saying!"

"Oh, don't I!" She laughed bitterly, no longer trying to conceal her anger. "And I'll tell you who it is—"

"Evelyn!" Jim's voice was low, firm, as he led her away. "You're not going to create a scene! If you have anything to say come to my study!"

It was a more subdued Evelyn who told her story to a stony faced Jim.

"She told me she wanted the dress but couldn't afford it; I sent her into my bedroom for—for my diamonds, and the money was lying on the table in plain sight. After she had gone, I found that my money had gone too! And she has the dress, as well as a very expensive-looking wrap. Where did she get all that money?"

"Probably," Jim answered, lamely, "she charged them!"

"Ask her!"

"Evelyn, that would be unpardonable!" Jim's voice was growing very grim. "Especially when I know she didn't take your money!"

"If you won't—then I'll ask her!"

"Oh, no, Evelyn, I'll not allow that. You are a guest in our home, but Miss Lovelace is also our guest!"

"Very well then, there's just one alternative. If you won't agree to it, I shall force the truth from her—here. Let's go down to the store—you have the key of course—and see if there is a charge-slip made out; or if my bills are in your safe. You see I—I laid the bills on my desk when I returned from the bank with them, and carelessly allowed some ink to spatter over them, ink from my desk pen. The ink marks will identify the bills quite positively."

"Very well," Jim agreed, gruffly. "We're off!"

A LITTLE later Jim and Evelyn were in the dimly lighted Emporium, Jim hunting frantically through the day's credit slips—through the L's. Evelyn stood near, smiling inscrutably.

"You're wasting your time, Jim," she offered sweetly. "Have you the combination of the safe?"

"Certainly! But wait—here it is!"

Evelyn, peering anxiously over Jim's shoulder, read under the name of Lovelace, two items: handkerchiefs—$1.25; ribbon—$.18. Total, $1.43.

Silently Jim stared at the slip. Evelyn's low, amused laugh aroused him.

"Don't be so chivalrous, Jim! Did not you ever hear of a pretty girl being a common thief?"

"Joy is no common thief, nor any kind of a thief!" Jim glared at her.

"Well, anyhow, let's try the safe—see if my ink-spotted bills are there."

Without a word, Jim stalked to the safe and knelt before it. Back, forward, still silent, he spun the shiny knob, working the combination until the heavy door swung open.

One stack of new bills at the very top caught Evelyn's eyes.

"There they are, my bills!" she cried excitedly. "See the ink marks on them?"

Mechanically, Jim took the stack of bills in his hand, gazed stupidly at them for a space of time. "All right, take them," he said, finally, heavily. "You win, Evelyn!"

He slammed shut the doors of the safe fiercely, snapped off the lights, grasped Evelyn by the arm, and started for the door.

Still silent, he assisted Evelyn into the little sport roadster.

"Jim," her softened voice purred, "are you so terribly disappointed? Are you in love with that girl, Jim, dear?"

"Please don't talk about it, Evelyn! Surely, you realize that I could never love a thief?"

"Of course, Jim, I know!" Evelyn snuggled reassuringly against his shoulder. "You see, a woman has in-

tuition in these things. And—I'm sorry—but you had to know."

"Yes—I had to know!" he answered bitterly.

"I'll interview the young lady as soon as we get back," she suggested, happily. "She must leave immediately!"

"No," Jim answered shortly. "I'll do it! It's up to me to see this thing through!"

THE soul-stirring strains of the orchestra and the soft blending of colors in the many beautiful gowns made a picture almost unforgetable. Employees of Jim Brent's Emporium mingled freely, happily, with his more fortunately situated friends.

Joy, however, was troubled. She tried not to show it, and succeeded. Joy never lacked for partners, and only her light banter and clever subterfuges had kept her program from being filled long ago. She had promised Jim to save him some dances—but where was he?

It was becoming exceedingly difficult now, and, in spite of her best efforts, only a few dances remained. Her present partner, Kenneth Laird, was a wonderful dancer. All the girls were crazy about him; he was good-looking, wealthy. Why couldn't she just forget Jim and give herself over to the enjoyment of the dance? He was somewhere with Evelyn; she had seen him go away with her.

Joy knew she had no right to care, but she did, just the same.

"A penny for your thoughts, little Bright-Eyes!" Kenneth Laird was looking his open admiration down into Joy's wistful, flowerlike face.

"They're not worth so much," she laughed, evasively. "I was just—"

"This is my dance, please, Miss Lovelace!"

Jim Brent, tall and stern, was cutting in. "Sorry, Laird!"

With a quick intake of breath, Jim took the girl, dainty and lovely as a tiny, colorful cloud, into his arms. Not a word did he speak, but Joy was content. He had come, as he had said he would.

He looked down into her eyes, blue-black, shining, and clasped her a little closer. The strained tension in his face was lessening, giving place to the eager, intoxicated light of perfect happiness.

Evelyn, in the arms of Kenneth Laird, danced past.

"Jim!" she called. "Remember your promise!"

As if from a trance, Jim awoke to the reality of painful duty. Silently, grim-faced, he guided Joy through the open French doors, out to the deserted veranda, and on to the garden beyond.

"Oh!" she cried, her young voice sweet and vibrant. "This is so lovely—your garden!"

All about them, fragrance and beauty. A leafy arbor stood nearby, and into this Jim guided her, almost savagely.

"I must ask you something now, and I'd rather ask you—out here!" His voice was husky.

JOY trembled, her heart pounding madly. Finally she spoke tremulously.

"You—you frighten me a little. You sound so—so fierce! Is it—something about me—you don't like?"

"Like!" Jim fairly flung the word at her. Shafts of moonlight filtered through an opening in the foliage of the arbor, revealing her like a silvery fairy-child, small and sweet — and dear. "Like you! Why, Joy, sweetheart, *I love you!*"

She was in his arms, smothered by

his strong, passionate kisses. "I want you dear, for always, for my own wife!"

The strains of the orchestra sounded enchantingly through the opened windows, but the two in the arbor neither heard nor cared. The moon peeped in through the openings—but the moon keeps its secrets.

Finally, from Joy's lips, came the same question that Eve, undoubtedly, forced her first sweetheart to answer:

"Dear, did you ever love any other girl?"

And Jim, following the worthy example handed down by Adam, made answer:

"Never, my own! You're my first and only sweetheart!"

Faint memories stirred in Joy's mind. She had seen those exact words inscribed on a photograph of Jim that very day!

"Jim, didn't you ever use those same words to anybody else? Think, now think hard!"

"Sure!" And Jim kissed her again for good measure. "To my mother! I always called her that—till now!"

So Evelyn had borrowed the picture for a purpose! Well, Joy wouldn't tell on her.

"Your mother is such a dear!" she sighed, rapturously. "Now, Jim, I must ask you something terribly important. Jim, dear, would you love me just the same if I wasn't honest?"

She felt his muscular arms twitching, tightening their grasp about her as if they never intended to let her escape.

"Anything you may have done in the past," he told her low, "doesn't matter. Nothing matters except that I have you—for keeps!"

"But, Jim, I must tell you! It's too close, too real. And I don't want to start keeping secrets from you. Why, Jim! Jim, dear, what is the matter? Why are you trembling so?"

Jim placed a hand over her lips as if to silence her, then withdrew it. Perhaps it would be better to hear it all.

"It's about some money, Jim; a lot of money—bills. My handbag was left in a dressing room at the store for a moment, and when I opened it this afternoon, I found a lot of bills, probably put there by some customer—a mistake, of course. And I wanted this dress—oh, you can't know how I wanted it—for you, Jim! I wanted to look my best for you."

"What do I care!" he cried fiercely, savagely. "Whatever you took I'll replace! You can call it a pre-wedding present from me."

"But I didn't take the money, silly! I gave it to Mr. Binns; he put it in the safe till the owner is found."

"But—but—" Jim was stammering now, scarcely able to comprehend. "The dress—you have it!"

"I know; that's the most wonderful part of all. This dress, it's a present — from your mother! When I reached home—I hadn't even dared go see it—there it was waiting for me, the whole beautiful outfit, rose-petal wrap and all, a birthday gift from your mother. Oh, Jim, dear," she laughed ecstatically, a trifle nervously. "You mustn't hold me so tight; you're crushing me! Oh, I'm so happy, so happy!"

Joy was wholly unable to understand the moods of this man of hers—but she felt immeasurably satisfied to nestle forever within the protecting folds of his arms, to feel his ardent kisses.

"Oh, Jim!" She broke away. "Isn't that music heavenly?"

Out from the great house floated the strains of a waltz, lovely, tantalizing, alluringly beautiful:

When My Dreams Come True.

Tryst

I WATCH the moon walk down the sky,
The ships walk down the sea;
And, past the beach where sea gulls cry,
You walk to me.

The world is still to hear you speak,
The sea is still to hear.
I feel your hair against my cheek,
My dear!

I feel your arms that hold me tight
And very strong and true.
The world is glamorous to-night
With you.

The world is breathless, and my heart
With knowing this
Expected, unexpected
Kiss.

Mary Carolyn Davies

Handwriting and Happiness

By JOHN FRASER

JOHN FRASER, gifted handwriting expert, who has made a name for himself both in his native England and here in America, will analyze your handwriting. If you wish to know whether your sweetheart is the right man for you to marry, inclose samples of your own and your sweetheart's handwritings and address your letter to Mr. Fraser, care "Service for Sweethearts." If you wish his help in finding the profession for which you are best fitted, address him care "Your Career." For general reading, care "Character Analysis."

You may take advantage of one or any service, but a coupon must accompany each request for handwriting analysis. Coupon will be found at the end of this department.

Mr. Fraser bases his judgments on the scientific rules of graphology. In no case does he forecast the future or attempt to reveal the past. Scientific graphology undertakes only to reveal the inner secrets of your nature.

As many answers will be given on these pages as space permits. All other questions will be answered by mail. A stamped, addressed envelope must accompany your request for analysis.

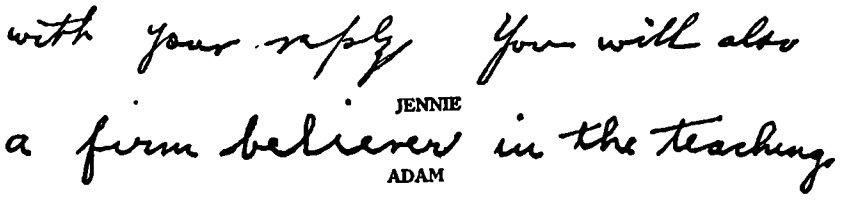
THE other day I had a letter from Janet L., Springfield, Missouri. According to what she tells me her whole household has been benefited by the "Handwriting and Happiness" advice.

It appears that Janet contemplated getting married around Easter, and though she loves the boy she wanted a better knowledge of her life companion through his handwriting. She got it, and it pleased her immensely. Eunice, her younger sister, has just finished high school, and though she knew she had artistic tastes, she wasn't aware that she was "cut out" to be an interior decorator until I told her. She now believes she would be very happy

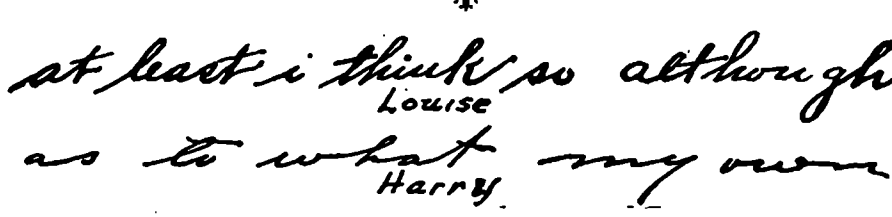
in that line of business. The father of this happy family also got the "low-down" on himself through an analysis of his penmanship, with the result that dad has resolved to make 1930 the best year in his life.

So once more I say let me be your friend!

SERVICE FOR SWEETHEARTS



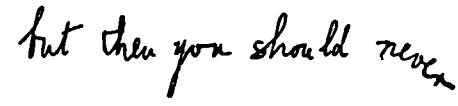
(Jennie O., Stratford, Conn.) You appear to be a very fine type of girl. You are spiritually minded, with rather romantic predilections. I can quite understand why you two young folk gravitated toward each other. Though your dispositions are as wide apart as the poles in certain directions, when it comes to the fundamentals you stand hand in hand and shoulder to shoulder. For example, you both have a wide outlook on life. Your education and your upbringing have been responsible for this. You are both generous and whole-hearted about giving your share to worthy objects. There is no niggardliness in either of your dispositions. You are both logical in your thinking; and Adam's judgment is something that could be relied upon. However, your fiancé has a lot of the "old Adam" in him. Like all the rest of us, he has inherited a great deal from his namesake, who started something in the Garden of Eden many years ago. In the first place, he can be very mulish when he does not get his own way. He also has a nasty habit of keeping his own counsel, with the result that there is a decided lack of frankness and impartiality in his nature. He belongs to the type of men who don't like dictation from their wives. So, if you are a wise girl, Jennie, don't try to bulldoze him into doing something he doesn't want to do. You know there are more ways of killing a cat than by drowning it in buttermilk. And you can get all you want out of Adam if you only will use a little diplomacy. Of course, you are no angel yourself, and my advice to you is learn to be more patient and to be less opinionated. Don't be such a know-it-all little girl, otherwise you might some day be minus friends.



(Miss Louise G., Buffalo, N. Y.) There are many traits in your nature which are distinct liabilities to you. You love to show off. There is no one just as good or just as pretty as Louise —according to your way of thinking.

STUDY YOUR OWN HANDWRITING

Should the last word on line droop like this:



—it shows that you are in low spirits. It is also a sure indication that you get the "blues" often.

When the words incline downward like these:

—the writer is fighting against depression and disappointment, and always shows a courageous spirit in face of difficulties.

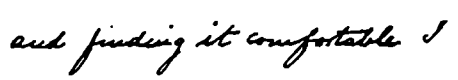
When each word ascends such as this:

—it denotes moderation in all things. The writer is never hasty in making decisions. It also shows constant consideration for other people's comfort.

When the writing slants upward like this:

—the person is ambitious, lively, and buoyant. The writer is never discouraged, and allows nothing to daunt his ambitions.

If your writing is horizontal such as this:

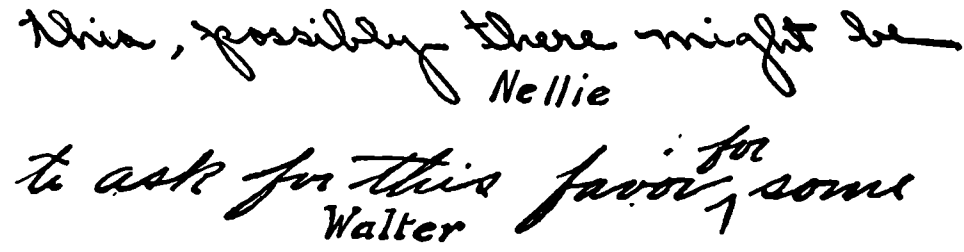


—you believe in the old adage that "honesty is the best policy." It also shows that you are a straightforward and clean-cut sort of individual, whose word is as good as his bond.

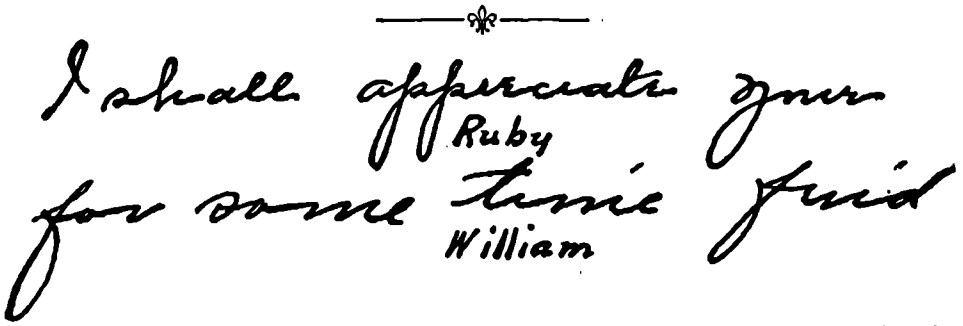
How do you finish your words?

—If the final stroke is turned downward like this, it tells you are a person who has a habit of hiding things from other people. You are never open and above board with anything, and are of a secretive disposition.

That attitude simply kills your chance of success and popularity. I understand that you are engaged to Harry, and your wedding is to be "in the not far distant future." When I think of all the adjusting you require above the ears I wish I had you beside my desk for thirty minutes! I'm telling you there is only one way to be happy in this world, and that is to be humble-minded. Your impatience and fretfulness when things don't go your way are weaknesses to be reckoned with. Harry, on the other hand, is no saint himself, and I question very much if your lord and master will put up very long with your peevishness. You are far from being a well mated pair.



(Nellie F., Albany, N. Y.) Your frequent disagreements with Walter are traceable to your own cool nature. You must confess, Nellie, that yours is a disposition which does not enthuse over many things. Though you are a very straightforward and conscientious girl, with many good qualities in your make-up, when it comes to sentimentality you are simply wanting. It is not in your nature to be bubbling over with affection. You are full of self-restraint and cautious about letting other people know you care for them. You belong to the type who don't believe in "pinning their hearts to their sleeves," and consequently act in a cold, reserved manner which sounds the death-knell to ardor or enthusiasm. Walter is ardent, loving and demonstrative, the very antithesis of you. He has a personality which glows like a fire and attracts other natures to it by its magnetism. You, no doubt, blame the boy for being flirtatious, while all the time it's merely his sunny disposition which is responsible for his popularity. How you ever came to be interested in Walter, or rather he in you, is more than I can understand. Personally, I don't think you are suited to each other.



(Miss Ruby McD., Digby, N. S.) Your sweetheart is a man of the world who knows his way about. He has lots of self-dependence, and requires no

political "pull" to get to his objective. His big outlook on life is refreshing, and his love for men and women is the secret of his popularity. I'm not a bit surprised, Ruby, by what you tell me about William's success these past months. Of course I know you are more anxious for me to tell you about his sentimental nature, and whether he will make a good husband for you. Well, a man of William's temperament is sure to make a girl happy, for the simple reason that he is broadminded and affectionate—extremely so. He is never quite happy unless he is crooning over you and whispering words of love into your ears. And that's just the reason you are so crazy about this boy; he says the right thing at the right time, and he never disappoints you. I would call him an adept in love as well as in business, and for this reason I consider you a lucky girl. Your two natures blend exceedingly well. My advice to you, Ruby, is to get married to William, and when the wedding cake is cut don't forget to send me a piece!

and let me know just
Helen
give me an insight to some.
Thomas

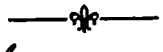
(Miss Helen P., St. Louis, Mo.) It is quite unnecessary to tell me how well the two of you get on together. As you were describing to me that scene on the mountains, and your experience with your sweetheart amidst the beauties of nature, I could visualize in my own prosaic way what rapture and joy were yours. When it comes to picking a real he-man for a husband, Helen, I admire your taste, since Thomas has all the earmarks of a splendid companion and a nearly perfect husband. You have chosen a young man of common sense, a fellow who has sane ideas. Though he gravitates to the material side of life more than to the spiritual, nevertheless he has superior qualities which offset any tendency toward materialism. In a word, he is well poised both in head and heart. I notice you belong to the analytical tribe of folk who have a faculty for being particular about small things. You are much more concentrative in your way of thinking than is Thomas. Though he has a fine business head on his shoulders, at the same time he is more of the harum-scarum type, who jump at conclusions. Both of you have an abundance of temper. Patience is not much of a virtue with you, Helen. I would say that you are a temperamental girl who requires lots of "nursing" if there is to be peace in the house. I hope Thomas understands you sufficiently well to know how to handle you in your off days. If he doesn't, there's sure to be "trouble on the Wabash." Despite these foibles, however, I would say you are well suited to each other.

YOUR CAREER

I would appreciate

(Kathleen M., Barre, Vermont.) I was interested in your letter for

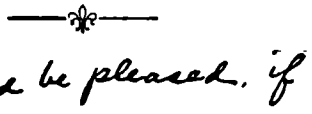
two reasons: first, because of your description of your experience in the business world, and secondly because you have a "good line of talk." Possessing the latter trait, you are in the right line of business. The whole texture of your penmanship tells me that you are specially fitted for the cloak and suit industry, not so much as a saleswoman, but as a designer of garments. You have an eye for the nifty things, and you possess a quick perception when something novel meets your eyes. As a business woman you are exceptional. I'm thankful I don't live in Barre, for you would be sure to get me as one of your satisfied customers. Not that I wouldn't trust you, in a business way, but rather that the mink coat you could sell me with my eyes wide open wouldn't give me much of a thrill as long as my recent experience in Wall Street is still fresh in my memory. To come back to your nature and disposition, you are logical and trustworthy, with a keen sense of justice in your dealings with the public. I like your sound judgment, and your constructive deductions. You are not a "home woman" in any sense of the word. You have turned your back on those things which bulk so largely in the minds of so many of your sex—homemaking and home life. You are, first and last, a woman of the world, and as such I would say you are a distinct success.



(Miss Susan McC., Montreal, Que.) Your angular handwriting reveals to me that you have lots of business acumen. You also have a very sentimental nature. Since office work apparently appeals to you more than anything else, I would indorse all you say in your letter about your going to evening classes. One cannot learn too much regarding up-to-date methods in office routine. You have been blessed, however, with talents which should enable you to do well also in the literary world. I observe imaginative power and a certain keenness of perception which would be invaluable to a writer of fiction. Socially, you are a good mixer, and have the faculty of making friendships readily. Your straightforward and approachable manner will be of great assistance to you in your business career. In my opinion you have a wonderful chance to succeed in your chosen profession, since it is only a matter of time before some busy executive will see your good qualities and make you his right-hand "man."

(Miss Rose S., Philadelphia, Pa.) You are a girl who possesses very unusual talent. You are blessed with one of the greatest assets any human being could wish for—mental alertness. Your mind is quick, alive, and vibrant to the merest influences, and as a result you settle the most difficult questions in a jiffy. Music is your forte, and the more assiduous you are at it the higher you are going to climb in your profession. I base my conclusions on the way you make your capital letters. They are all simple and without any ornamentation whatever. Your margins are wide on both sides, a sure sign of artistic taste. Your creative power peeps at me through your upper loops and disconnected letters, while the whole style of penmanship is original in the extreme. I like the way you curve your letters

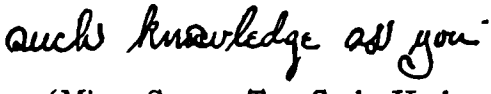
at the bottom, which invariably indicates musical talent. Seldom have I seen a sample of handwriting which speaks so clearly of one's vocation as yours does. One day you will, I know, thrill thousands with that God-given talent which you are lucky enough to possess.



(Miss Georgina B., Greenwich, Conn.) You are a girl with a quiet, unassuming nature. A personality such as yours is a great asset in business life as well as in social circles. By the careful way you form your letters and the uniformity of them I conclude that you would be a valuable assistant to any business executive whose time is preoccupied with a thousand and one things. Your quick-thinking brain and your accuracy would be a real power for good in an organization which puts brains before beauty, or merit before "hot air." I notice by the formation of your "b" that you are concise in your manner of speech, and have ideas which are seldom trite and commonplace. I think you pride yourself upon having the courage of your convictions, and at times would be rather outspoken when you were convinced that your cause was right and proper. I see indications all over your penmanship of good sound judgment. I would imagine you would rarely act hastily on matters of business, and seldom, if ever, get confused or excited when a crisis comes. You could always be depended upon in matters calling for foresight and economy. If there is any weakness in your mentality, I would say it was your memory. This, in my opinion, would be all the better strengthened. It is quite good as it is, but you would be infinitely more confident of yourself if you had it working like some of your other qualities. You are first and last a business woman, and as such you are sure to make your mark in the world of commerce.

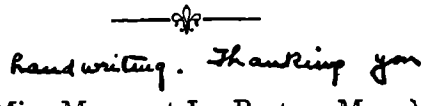
(Miss Fannie A. W., Oakland, Cal.) You have a good constructive mind, with a controlled and practical imagination. I would say that you are careful and prudent in all your affairs, and could be trusted to administer the affairs of others. Sentimentally, you have a warm heart, and your feelings govern, in a large measure, your actions. You would do well in the teaching profession. Your round penstrokes signify calmness, while your even margins and legible letters denote a systematic mind. Your memory is excellent, judging by your "i" dots and your punctuation marks. You are essentially a generous-hearted girl, and when your sympathies are touched, as they are very easily, you can be most lavish in the expenditure of money and time. I find that your feelings are easily wounded, and it is tremendously easy to hurt your pride. I think your sensitivity goes a trifle too far, and, as a result, you are inclined to make yourself miserable over trifles.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS



(Miss Susan T., Seal Harbor, Maine.) First of all, you are not always as concentrative as you should be. You try to focus your whole atten-

tion on a given problem which has to be solved and yet you find your mind wandering away from it, and you get to thinking about other unrelated things. Consequently your judgment is not firm. You don't like to be rushed in your decisions. You take your pleasures as you take your emotional expressions, without undue emphasis, calmly. I would say that there is a little too much self-consciousness and self-restraint in your character. Judging by your "g's" and "y's" I would say that you are fond of ceremony, and no amount of palaver is obnoxious to you, particularly if it comes from a man. Your mind is a constructive one, and your imagination is admirably controlled by your intelligence. If you would give yourself a chance you could exercise good judgment in practical affairs. I see quite a lot of real executive ability in your make-up.



(Miss Margaret L., Boston, Mass.) You have a brain which is accustomed to do clear thinking. There is absolutely no diffusion in your thought. Presented with a new problem, you sit down and think it through. Personally I discover you are self-conscious and rather self-restrained. This is probably due to some earlier experience in associating with people whom you thought more brilliant or more entertaining than yourself. Whatever the cause, the tendency still clings, and you find yourself strangely reserved and reticent when in the company of strangers, or even acquaintances.

You seem to have an extremely simple disposition, craving little attention and seeking, for the most part, to be left in the peace and quietness which you love. I see you have a very buoyant nature. You are essentially cheery and optimistic, which makes it hard for you to look on the dark side of things. It takes a great deal to discourage you, and, what is more, you are blessed with a boundless ambition. You impress me as a girl possessing inherent ability and a fine personality.

JOHN FRASER,
ALL-STORY MAGAZINE,
280 Broadway,
New York City.

This coupon is not good after February 22. A stamped addressed envelope must be enclosed when forwarding.

I enclose handwriting specimen for
—Service for Sweethearts.
—Your Career.
—Character Analysis.
(Check which you prefer. One coupon must accompany each choice.)

Name.....

Street and No. .....

City..... State.....

Heart-to-Heart

Tell Your Love Troubles to

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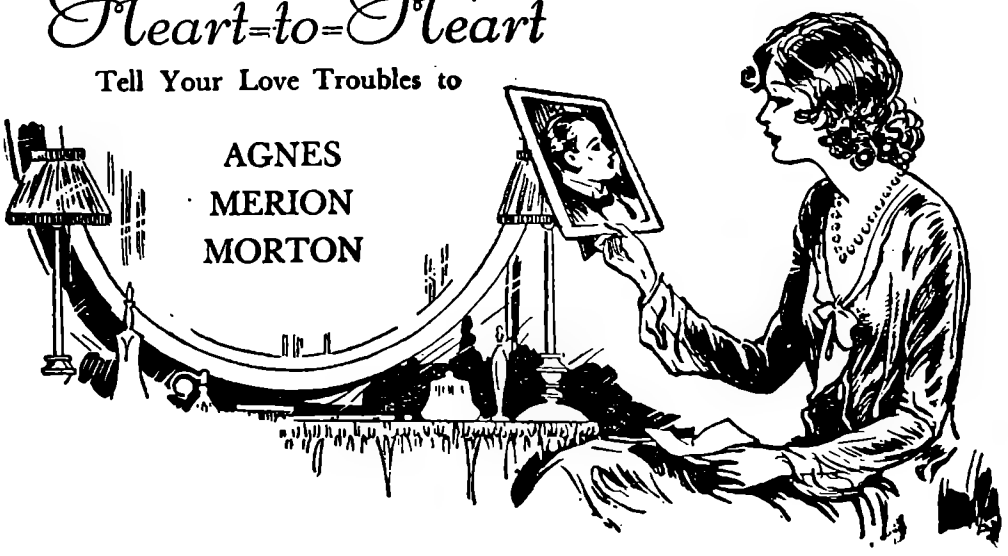

MRS. MORTON wants you to feel that she is a friend—some one to whom it is a comfort to tell your problems, who will advise and encourage you in your struggle for happiness, and who is always here to help. She is interested in you. Write to her freely, addressing your letter care All-Story Magazine, 280 Broadway, N. Y. C.

Every letter is confidential.

As Mrs. Morton receives so many letters, she cannot publish answers to all in the space allotted to her. Some, therefore, are answered by mail. Be sure to enclose a stamped, addressed envelope with your question.

AMONG the problems that come to my desk, one of the most interesting is that of the girl who loves a married man. There is seldom any doubt about the course she should follow, but the question is likely to be a very real and a very painful one to her.

DEAR MRS. MORTON:

Your advice is always so wonderful. I wonder if you can help poor me. Would it shock you for me to tell you I am in love with my best friend's husband? I hope not, because if you are shocked with me there is no one I can confide in.

It happened this way: For years I have felt a secret fascination for this girl's husband. He is a very handsome young man, but though sometimes I would find him staring at me with a sort of burning look in his blue eyes, he never said a word to encourage me—I'll say that for him—till last summer. I hadn't seen him for years, being employed up here in Canada. Then I went to New York and soon had a bid to visit him and his wife, my girl friend, on Long Island. They had only two bedrooms, so she and I had one and he took the other with the two children—they have two little boys, so cute! I feel awful whenever I think of them. Well, Mrs. Morton, last thing he came in to say good night to us, and while we were talking Amy went out and left us alone a minute. Suddenly I felt all breathless because he was leaning over me with such a strange look in his eyes, and then he kissed me and said: "I've always wanted to do that, Viola. You knew it, didn't you, darling?" I said: "Oh, you mustn't!" And then Amy came back and he left.

You can picture how I felt. Amy kept me talking for a long time into the night and, honest, I don't know what she said or what I answered. Then next day she and I took it into our heads to go up in an airplane for one of those ten-minute flights. Robin, her husband, looked worried when she told him. He said: "Let me know before you really do." Well, she did let him know before we

went out to the flying field. We had our flight and when I next saw Robin, and Amy was out of the room, he took me in his arms and begged me never to make him suffer like that again. He said: "When I thought of you up there flirting with death I aged ten years, sweetheart. I wouldn't want to live if anything happened to you." You see, he never thought about my girl friend at all, and that made me feel awful.

Well, she was always around and we didn't get much more chance till he took me to the station, and then she sent the eldest little boy along. Do you think she suspected something?

I didn't see him again till a month ago, when I got a chance to get back to New York, though we'd been writing regularly. He's a salesman and while I was there he came to see me every chance he got, and took me out in his car. I had to give in that I was crazy about him, and we had the most wonderful time I've ever had in my life. One day he said: "Maybe you'd better give Amy a ring. If she finds out you're here she'll think it's queer." I did ring her then, and I met her a couple of times in town. Once I took her to the movies and for an oyster stew afterward at the Grand Central Station. Imagine how I felt—with her husband's kisses warm on my lips.!

Mrs. Morton, what can I do? We both feel we can't live without each other much longer. Please advise me, as I want to do the right thing, no matter how much I suffer. I think your column is a wonderful department, and so sensible. Please don't tell my name in it. Just call me

WORRIED FRIEND.

Viola, if you really want to do the "right thing," do you have to ask me or any one else what it is? A man who has a wife and two little children has duties and responsibilities with which no single girl should dream of interfering. They have every claim upon him; you have not the shadow of one. No, I am not "shocked"—after some of the letters I have read I doubt whether I can ever be shocked again—but you must know that you have been very foolish, very indiscreet, to encourage him in any degree, and to allow yourself to daydream so much about him.

In the first place, Viola, a man who will make love to a girl behind his wife's back is, generally speaking, a practiced philanderer. His attentions are no compliment. Do you imagine he would stick to you, once he had won you? Suppose he even got a divorce and married you, how long could you hold him? Do you know what Cleopatra said to Antony, who had deserted his wife for her?

"Why should I think you can be mine
and true,
Though you in swearing shook the throned
gods,
Who have been false to Fulvia?"

Cleopatra felt that—that he would betray her in her turn—and there are very few of us who can boast her charms.

What you should do lies plain before you—both for your friend's sake, for the two little boys' sake, and *for your own:* put this man out of your life and out of your heart. You cannot, perhaps, control your feelings all at once, but you can certainly control your actions.

Do not see him any more; do not write to him again; do not allow him to communicate with you. You have been wrong, and the only thing you can do is begin to be right as soon as possible. You will get over this in time, wayward and rebellious as your heart may be. Some morning, sooner than you would believe, you will wake up and realize that you are free of him. Meanwhile, try the old, infallible prescription—a hobby of your own. In your case, I think it should be writing. From the tone of your letter I feel that you have the gift of romantic story-telling. Develop it. Take a correspondence course in composition, or, better still, a course in a college. Learn to use that power constructively. It will fill your mind, give you a new interest in life and, best of all, heal this wound from which you suffer.

The next letter is similar to yours, but in this case the girl's affections are, fortunately, not involved.

DEAR MRS. MORTON:

I have read your letters to others who have written you, and as you have helped them I am going to tell you my story and see if you can help me. Some months ago I met a young man and thought myself in love, but, Mrs. Morton, he was a married man. I was lonesome, and as I thought I loved him I met him secretly many times. Then the feeling that I thought love began to die when I met the boy I really care for. Many a time I have tried to tell this married man that this foolishness must end, but he broke down and cried, the last time I was with him, telling me he loved me dearly and it would kill him if I threw him over. I was afraid then to tell him I loved another, and was silent. We parted friends. What shall I tell him? What shall I do?

TROUBLED.

I can only repeat to you what I said to Worried Friend—let him go. Do not make any more engagements with him; do not answer his letters. It will be easier for you than for her, because you do not care for him and do care for some one else. He has been very weak, Troubled; I cannot feel that he is worthy of much consideration. Any man who is already tied must know that he can only succeed in spoiling a young girl's life by trying to make her love him. If he forces himself upon you again, tell him that you are through, and that you mean it. Refuse to be flattered or cajoled into having anything more to do with him.

DEAR MRS. MORTON:

Here's my question—shall I give him up or keep on as we are? I'm going to lay my problem before you in as plain a way as possible, and hope to see your advice soon. I am twenty-two and have gone for a year with a young man of twenty-eight. He has proved, in some ways, that he loves me, although he seldom tells me that as he isn't given to talking love-talk. He has told me from the very start that he could not marry me because of financial reasons, and at first we just went out as friends once in awhile, but for the last eight months we've been going steady, and neither of us ever goes with any one else. He still says that it would be unfair for him to marry me as I have always had practically everything I wanted, although we are far from wealthy. Now I know he doesn't make much money, and he never will make more at his trade, and with conditions the way they are I see no possible chance of his making more. It would be hard to get along, but if he really loved me wouldn't he want to try? This is the only reason I doubt his affection, because he is wonderful to me.

I haven't anybody else now, anyway, and if I give him up maybe I'll just be without any one, and still I don't want to keep on with him so indefinitely, feeling that I am wasting my time. I hate to bring the subject up, it is such a delicate matter. I do not want him to feel I am forcing myself on him. He used to remind me every once in awhile that we should break up, but the last few months he hasn't mentioned it. I try to get interested in somebody else; then I remember how sweet he is and I want just him, because, after all, I kind of love him. I guess I have made my letter too long for your column, but please tell me what you think.

UNDECIDED DOT.

Dot, your problem is a very real one and, unfortunately, a rather frequent one. There are many men who feel they are too poor to marry, and yet they are not unselfish enough to let the girl who attracts them alone. They take up her time and win her heart, all the time consoling themselves with the reflection that they are "honorable" because they have frankly stated their position. Yet they keep other men away from her and prevent her from finding some one who might be able to give her a real home and make her happy.

Yes, it is a delicate subject, yet it ought to be possible for you to say to him: "You know you always used to say that we ought to break up. Well, I have come to your way of thinking. Let's try to get along without seeing so much of each other." If he really loves you, Dot, he would not ask you to live in poverty for his sake; he would strain every nerve in his body to improve his conditions so that he could have something worth while to offer you. He would have enough respect for himself as well as for you, to

want to do that. Why decide that he can do nothing to advance himself in the world? The man with the will and the vision to succeed can usually decide what he wants, and go and get it.

I think you should make up your minds to live without each other for at least a year. Test out this "kind" of love. See if you can't find something to take its place. If at the end of that time you still think that there is no happiness for you except in him, you may not feel so "undecided." You may believe that it will be safe for you to marry, knowing that you will probably have to keep on working to support yourself all your life in order to keep your home together. Many women do that and are even happier than they would be doing housework. But if it isn't easy—it involves too many sacrifices—and it takes a lot of love to make such a marriage "go."

DEAR MRS. MORTON:

I am a very ardent reader of your department in ALL-STORY MAGAZINE, and I think your advice is wonderful to every individual who writes to you. I wonder whether you are old or young; you sound as though you have had some experience in this world. Would you let me give some advice to the women readers of ALL-STORY? I have written a poem for the women only, and hope it will bring some of them to their senses before it will be too late. I have been married eight months now and find that this remedy works wonders with men.

TO THE WOMEN

Where there's love there's happiness;
When you're happy there's no scrappiness.

Take my advice, don't be a fool,
Love your husband—make it a rule.

Don't fight with hubby when he gets home,
For if you do he'll start to roam
And go out nights, and stay out late;
And if he does, God help your fate.

Make it a rule to have his dinner;
When you do, you'll find you're the winner.

He'll love you more and bring you flowers,
He'll sit at home with you hours and hours.

Take my advice, do as I say,
And you will find you'll lure your husband home that way.

Don't you think that this is good advice, Mrs. Morton? I do, and hope it will help some young married woman whose husband likes to stay out nights. Wishing you all the luck in the world to make this department bigger and better, I am

ONE OF ALL-STORY'S STANCH BOOSTERS.

Yes, I think it is very good advice and I hope it works as well in your case for eight years as it apparently has for eight months.

Before we finally turn the page on Al Higgins, there are two more letters dealing with him that I wish to share with you. He must have been ready to cry "Quarter!" long ago.

DEAR MRS. MORTON:

May I say a few words to Al Higgins, who wrote to Slave-wife through your magazine? Mr. Higgins, you surely are one "conceited ass." (Yes, I'm English and proud of it.) There must be a cog loose somewhere in your brain. Right here I'm going to quote Will Rogers in Monday, November 11, Rocky Mountain *News*. He says: "It sure did kick up some excitement in the Senate when Senator Moses called other Senators 'Sons of wild jackasses.' Well, if you think it made the Senators hot, you just wait till you see what happens when the jackasses hear how they have been slandered."

That applies to you, too, Mr. Higgins.

I, too, have been married twice, and my first husband was the kind of man you probably are. He was a brute if there ever was one. And I still have a broken nose for remembrance. Also, I "brought home the bacon" even after I learned I was to be a mother. And to finish that little picture-show, he left me just three weeks before my baby boy was born. That's your kind of *man*.

Now I'll give you a picture-show of my kind of man, a real man. He is a widower and has a little girl six years old, two years older than my son. My husband has an average income of five hundred a month, so I have ample funds to have hired help—in fact, he has insisted that I have some one to help me—but I prefer to do my own work. On wash days, when I'm tired, he helps me do the dinner dishes; also when it is cold, as it is here now, he hangs the washing on the line for me, and yet he is *not* one of those "born fools" you wrote of. Far from it. If he says anything, I know he means it, and I

am more than willing to do his bidding, and if I want something done he is the same way. We are happy and content with our children aud ourselves, because he is my helpmeet and I his, just helping each other.

You, Mr. Higgins, do not belong in this day and age. You belong somewhere in the medieval era, and even there you would be out of place. In other words, I pity the two women who have had the misfortune to be your wives.

Just one more little thing I forgot to mention: at night, if the children fuss or want something, and I do not wake up immediately, my husband gets up to see what they want. Also, if I am ill, he will cook the children's meals and attend to their little wants, as well as any mother could. Could you do that? I don't believe so. Of course, that only happens when I can't get any one to come in and do it, and as we live in a small town it is not always an easy thing to get some one.

Now I'll wager my husband is not the only one who does these little things I have mentioned, and yet they are not "henpecked" or "born fools." They are just ideal husbands, where husband and wife work together to make their life as happy and cheerful as possible. If you, Mr. Higgins, would copy after these ideal husbands, you would not have to resort to matrimonial agencies to find your helpmeet, and also you would be far happier.

A Happy Wife and Mother.

Dear Mrs. Morton:

I am an habitual reader of your department. It amuses me immensely. Thus far I have been a silent observer and would be yet were it not for the—you might call it foolish—argument going on over one letter which has nothing extraordinary to distinguish it from thousands of similar cases which I have read in Heart-to-Heart clubs. There is only one reason which I can advance, and that is the writer is a man and therefore scorned by all women, who do not look for facts, but rush to conclusions immediately.

I am not a lawyer, but one thing I do is to analyze a problem before taking the offensive or defensive. Going back to the letter proper, I would like to give my opinion as I have figured it. The author's first three sentences would give me the impression that he is a "Me and Myself" man and likes to blow off a little steam in that direction. His concluding part of the first paragraph I would not rush at so hastily because of my lack of facts, but in a logical way would say that there are two sides to it, and I would side with the man equally as much as the wife or wives he divorced. The man may be prejudiced against women because of his first experience, and so readily found fault with his next wife.

His reference to the Slave-wife I will not comment on, but would give the same argument I just gave for the preceding paragraph. As to his statement that she should be home raising babies, I think that is a little too strong and does not do him much credit.

In his statement about the young married couple, I think there is some logic. There seems to be a lot of love in the young husband's mind, but I don't think his wife is returning it in the way a wife really should. That man probably works hard in the daytime and then has to come home to find more of it when he needs to rest and relax. I am not forgetting the wife's part, either, but in my opinion that wife is not playing square. If she worked out it would be different, but before she got married she knew the bargain of such life and should stick to it.

As to his parting shot, I would draw conclusions that the man is a fool or a darn good practical joker. I have read some of the other versions, such as written by "Just a dodo," "Banjo Eyes and Happy," "Texas," etc., and have not found them lacking in earnestness, but just a little overearnest. I doubt whether you will print this letter, but that is not my aim. I would like to know your opinion, which thus far you have withheld.

An Interested Reader.

In a discussion of this sort, I prefer to observe strict neutrality in public, but shall be glad to tell you whose "side" I am on in a personal letter. I hope you will write again, and also hope that you mean we "amuse" you in the sense of "entertain" or "interest," and not in the sense of giving you a good laugh at our expense.

There are scores of other letters written to Mr. Higgins, but I feel we have already given him more room in these pages than is his due. The letters have been printed in the order of arrival, so those which came late will have to go unpublished. But I wish I could print every one of them and would like to thank all the writers for their trouble and interest, especially Mrs. C. C., of Philadelphia; Just Jerry, St. Paul; Virginia, California; "Me," Maplewood, Missouri; Indignant One, Chicago; Mrs. F. H., Idaho; A Happy Wife, Washington; A Shiftless Wife, and "One of Those Poor Fools," both of New York; Just Rose, Illinois.

A Male Hater, Atlanta—You must remember that all men are not like the one in question. Do write again.

Mary Adams—We have discussed your problem before. I'm so sorry you are wasting these years when you might be happy in such wearing self-pity. Your mother will relax her strictness soon, I am sure, especially if you show her you can think of something else besides having a good time with the boys. You will be treated just like your sisters when you are a little older. Your mother isn't unfair, Mary. She is doing the very best for you that she knows how to do. Trust her, my dear.

Allen X.—I think you should try to control your temper more than you do. There are very few places in the world where working conditions are ideal, and a man with a wife and four children to support must learn to overlook a great deal and bear a certain amount of injustice, however much he aches to "tell the boss what he thinks of him." If you leave position after position in a huff you will soon get a bad reputation and employers will be wary about engaging you. Try to see the other fellow's viewpoint, too.

Three times it came to her—this strange dream of herself, petted heiress to millions, clad in rags and cringing before the brutal taunts of a rough, uncouth man—

Then one day she disappeared!

When her lover found her again she was clad in miserable rags, and she did not remember him or anything of her past life.

What had happened to this spoiled darling of fate? What power had sent the luring dream?

Why, when about to wed the lover who remained faithful in spite of her clouded mind, should she—

But read this breath-taking story yourself in the next issue:

LED BY A DREAM

By MAUD McCURDY WELCH

Beauty For You

By FERNE CHANDLER

BEAUTY results from attention to the little things. Follow faithfully the beauty hints given in this department and you will be delighted with the results.

If there is any question about your personal appearance that you would like to ask Miss Chandler, address her care ALL-STORY, *280 Broadway, New York City.*

Be sure to enclose a stamped, addressed envelope with each question.

THE basis of all true skin beauty is cleanliness!

Now don't get huffy! I know you are all as clean as soap and water can make you, but do you know how to thoroughly cleanse the pores of your face, to keep your skin immune from blackheads, whiteheads and clogged pores? How to avoid enlarged pores?

I have mapped out a plan for daily morning use, and although you may feel it takes a few minutes of very precious time—what with hustling off to school, business, or getting at the routine of housekeeping—you will find that these minutes are well spent.

First thing in the morning take a boracic acid eye wash, to brighten your eyes and keep them healthy.

Next, put a bandeau around your head to protect your hair, then apply a generous coating of cleansing cream over the entire face and neck.

Remove the cream with a soft tissue, or dry cloth, using an upward and outward motion, to iron out any actual or potential wrinkles.

Always remember that hard rubbing or use of rough cloths on the face tends to stretch the skin and cause wrinkles.

Now to close the pores so they won't collect dust or get clogged with powder and rouge. Either wrap a piece of ice in one thickness of gauze and go over the face with it, or apply a cloth that has been wet in ice cold water and allow the cloth to remain on a few seconds, until you feel it getting warm. Press the cloth into the crevices of the eyes, nose and chin to close up those prominent pores. If you have enlarged pores one or more additional iced towels may be applied to the skin, for cold moisture will close even exaggerated cases of enlarged pores. You are now properly skin cleansed.

For a powder base apply your pet

Go gle

lotion at this point. If your skin is dry a light coating of vanishing cream is a good powder base. Allow it to stay on long enough to do its vanishing act, then remove the surplus with a soft tissue or cloth.

Powder and don whatever make-up you are accustomed to using.

Making this a regular morning habit will keep your skin clear, clean and give it added life and color. You owe it to yourself and those about you always to look fresh and lovely.

Never apply fresh make-up over old. The usual nose powdering and lip stick, of course, but at the end of a day, if you are going out for the evening, use cleansing cream once again and make-up will look more natural and fresh.

And always at night, before retiring, cleanse your face and neck with cream!

My constant repeating of the word cleanse may seem offensive to you. But I have washed my face carefully with warm water and a pet soap thinking I was immaculate, only to apply cleansing cream immediately afterward and find the tissue pot black! Tiny pores are just tempting to grime and dust.

This cleansing process is the one and only blackhead treatment. Candidly, blackheads tell of sheer neglect. A clean, well cared for skin will never show them.

Pimples—a common complaint—I hear about daily. There are three forms of pimples. Those from neglect, which are more crudely called blackheads. Those from "tummy" trouble—a good cathartic will rid you of those. And pimples that come from the use of impure cosmetics, or some soap that does not agree with your skin. If you keep your skin clean, your tummy cared for and watch what you use on your skin—and still have persistent pimples—see a physician.

None of us really need have blotchy skin. Just a little care can make us much more attractive.

If you have any special skin difficulties won't you write me, for I do so love to see a lovely skin and want to help you all to have perfect complexions. In the next issue of ALL-STORY I'll tell you some of the wonders of almond meal as a simple skin beautifier.

Let me hear from you if you want any beauty advice or suggestions. I am only too happy to share my knowledge with you.

DEAR MISS CHANDLER:

There is a hard surface on the palm of my hand, below the index finger. Can you tell me what it is and how to get rid of it?

(MRS.) HELEN GRAY,
Newark, N. J.

You probably have a callus on your hand—many girls have who do housekeeping. Or does something cause you constantly to use pressure on any given spot of the hand? Without seeing it I can't be sure, of course. But if you will try using a pumice stone on the spot, wetting the spot first, every day for a week I am sure you will erase it. If not it may be well to ask a doctor about it.

DEAR MISS CHANDLER:

I am heartbroken! My pet evening dress and my last summer tan do not match. Can you tell me how to remedy this?

GRACE FORBES,
Dobbs Ferry, N. Y.

I could suggest making your dress over! Instead, next issue I'll tell you how to bleach the skin.

The Lonesome Club

Conducted by DOROTHEA DALE

MAKE friends! Join the Lonesome Club and soon you will be getting more letters than any one you know.

Here's how to do it: if you wish your letter published in these pages write to Mrs. Dale, care of ALL-STORY, *280 Broadway, New York City, and describe yourself. Try to make it as interesting as possible—tell little things about yourself that will make others want to write to you.*

If you wish to communicate with the pals whose letters appear here, inclose your letter in a plain, stamped envelope and send it to Mrs. Dale. No letters will be forwarded without the extra stamp.

If you are a girl, you may write to other girls; if a man, to other men.

Please do not ask for the address of any one.

If You Like Surprises

DEAR MRS. DALE:

If any one wants an honest-to-goodness pal, just drop a line to this little girl, who is soon going to be eighteen. Come on, pals, the local post office is crying for business. Every one's welcome. That "every one" includes flappers, stenos, nurses, artists, but especially those who are awfully fond of music.

Whoopee, the first letter I get gets a big surprise! Now let's see who gets it, and until then I shall remain as

MYSTERY OF CHICAGO.

Sh-h-h! It's a Girl!

DEAR MRS. DALE:

I can always praise the ALL-STORY, and I saw your ad about making friends, so here goes. I hope my letter will miss the waste basket. Well, come on and correspond with "Piccolo Pete." You know him? No? Well, did you ever hear Pete go tweet, tweet, tweet on his piccolo? No? Well, I'll put you wise he's a girl in disguise. A girl called "Piccolo Pete."

I'm five feet three inches tall, fifteen years old, weigh one hundred pounds, have brown hair and dark brown eyes. Considered good-looking. All ages, every one welcome to correspond with me. I'm going to hope my mail box is full. So don't forget

PICCOLO PETE.

Will Send Photo

DEAR MRS. DALE:

I am very interested in your pal club, and would like very much to join if you will let me. I am a girl almost twenty, with brown eyes and brown hair. I am five feet one inch tall, and am considered quite pretty. I love dancing, skating and a few other sports. Would some one of my age who is just as lonely as I write to me? I promise to answer all letters and will also exchange pictures.

DOROTHY OF ROSLINDALE.

Any Other Newlyweds?

DEAR MRS. DALE:

I'm a young married woman of twenty-one years, and have a wonderful hubby and little girl. I get awfully lonesome at times for friends of my own age. I am five feet two inches tall, have brown hair and eyes, and I weigh one hundred and five pounds. I would

love to hear from other young married women with children. I promise to answer every letter I receive.

DOT.

Just Fifteen

DEAR MRS. DALE:

I am a girl of fifteen, almost sixteen, and I am so lonely. I want all kinds of friends. I am five feet three inches, weigh about one hundred and twenty-five pounds. I have brown hair; it is curly in front and on the right side. I love ice skating and all other kinds of sports.

MARION OF NEW JERSEY.

A Happy Pal

DEAR MRS. DALE:

It's not long before I get married, so I'm happy and not often lonely, but if any lonely girl or young married woman wants to write to me I am sending my address. Particularly any one who agrees with me that Al Higgins, who wrote to Mrs. Morton's department, is a villain!

JUST ROSE.

A Brown-Eyed Blonde

DEAR MRS. DALE:

I read your announcement in ALL-STORY of the opening of a new pen-pal department, and thought here was my chance to make some new friends. Gosh, oh, gee, isn't it wonderful to be living, especially when one is sure of getting at least fifty pen pals? I know I shall get that many. I am a fun-loving girl of seventeen, blond, brown eyes and tall. Would like to get letters from all over the world; I love dancing and outdoor sports of all kinds.

MARY LOU OF SUNNY CALIFORNIA.

Fun-Loving

DEAR MRS. DALE:

I read the ALL-STORY each issue. I would like to join your Lonesome Club, for I often find myself lonely. Will give a description of myself: I am a widow fifty-two years old, light complexion, gray hair, five feet three inches, weight one hundred and thirty-six pounds. Jolly and full of fun. Would like to correspond with some one near my own age and will answer all letters.

Hoping to hear from you soon and thanking you in advance,

MRS. ALICE C.,
New Jersey.

All Alone

DEAR MRS. DALE:

Please try to find me some pen friends. I don't mind what age they are, even children, so long as they can write nice, cheery, chatty letters. I am all alone in this old world and would be very glad to have a few friends in more places than just Michigan. Of course, that doesn't mean I do not want to hear from any one in this State, too. I've often thought how nice it would be to hear from different places. Never having had means to travel, I still would like to know about places. I am thirty-four years old, with dark hair and eyes. If you could find me some pen friends I assure you I'll do my part in the correspondence.

Wishing ALL-STORY the best of luck,

MRS. L. M. B.

Up and Coming

DEAR MRS. DALE:

I wonder if many girls as young as I am read ALL-STORY? I am only thirteen, but mature for my age and I would like to hear from older girls and would try to write them interesting letters.

DARK EYES UNDER SOUTHERN SKIES.

Peggy's a Good Sport

DEAR MRS. DALE:

I surely love to write letters and also to receive them, so I thought I'd ask you to help me out by getting me some "Pen Pals." I am twenty years old and have black hair, dark eyes, and am five feet two inches and weigh about ninety-eight pounds. Am from Virginia, and am here for illness, but am all well and almost ready to go home.

My hobbies are swimming, dancing, hiking and what-not. Always like to be a good sport on parties. So come on pals, fill my mailbox, for I promise to answer them as fast as they come.

LONESOME PEGGY.

Handsome, and How!

DEAR MRS. DALE:

We are two boys who are seeking friends. Will you aid us? We want correspondents from sixteen to twenty or a little over, any nationality. Randy, my brother, is twenty-two, dark hair and eyes, five foot ten, good-looking. I, Dack, am the "best-looking"—ha!—five feet ten, dark hair and blue eyes. I'm twenty. Everybody write to us, will you? We will answer all letters, exchange snapshots, *et cetera*. And if any of the fellows have pretty sisters or cousins, or nice girl friends—well, you won't be any the less welcome on that account.

Wishing the magazine oodles of success,

RANDY AND DACK OF TEXAS.

For Snappy Letters

DEAR MRS. DALE:

I am looking for a pen pal. I think you can help me out, so please try. I am a girl of eighteen, brown hair and eyes, love all sports, especially dancing. Would like girls about my age to write. I can promise to write some snappy letters and answer promptly. What

do you say, girls? Write and you won't be sorry. Mrs. Dale, you can call me

CLANG OF MASS.

Can Pass in a Crowd

DEAR MRS. DALE:

Come on, everybody! Get out your pen and paper. I am not lonely, but I love to make new friends.

I am a girl eighteen years of age and a junior in high school. Have light brown hair and blue-gray eyes, am five feet three inches tall, slender—and can pass in a crowd.

The thing I want most in the world is an airplane. A roller coaster is my weakness and the higher the better.

Step on it! I'll be waiting patiently.

FLAME OF N. H.

A Pal From Florida

DEAR MRS. DALE:

I am a widow, but not any the less an interesting letter writer for that! And I live in Florida and can tell lots about the sunny South to northern pen pals.

I am very lonely down here and will look forward to many answers.

DAISY OF FLORIDA.

"Well, the farce is over," he said sternly. "We'll break camp to-morrow and go back to Nairobi and get married."

"Get married?" she faltered.

"Of course. Since you have put me in a position where I *have* to marry you!"

"You don't have to marry me," she flared, cut to the quick but determined that he should not know she loved him.

"Do you think any one would believe I didn't know you were a girl when I took you on this African expedition?" he asked icily.

All her happiness was over! Why had she thought she could pretend to be a boy just to be near him?

And what would she do now? Miles from civilization, she must run away before he married her, hating her—

READ

JUNGLE SWEETHEART

By MARJORIE GLEYRE

In the Next Issue

ALL-STORY'S HALL OF FAME

Peggy Gaddis

PEGGY GADDIS'S name is already familiar to ALL-STORY readers. Her newest story, "Afraid to Love," appears in this issue. Peggy is an American girl—born and educated in the good old South—Gaddistown, to be exact. And she weaves her delightful tales of youth and romance not for fame and not for money, but simply because she loves the work.

She started writing at the age of ten, and shortly after her eleventh birthday a whole novel had been produced in her childish scrawl. Peggy fulfilled the promise of her childhood when she burst into professional authorhood at the youthful age of sixteen by selling a movie scenario! But this sale was the beginning of a fuller and more comprehensive literary career than even her closest friends had dared to dream for her.

More scenarios, articles for moving picture magazines, movie press agent work, editing, working on trade magazines, then on a newspaper—all these various phases of the writing game contributed to brim Miss Gaddis's cup of experience to overflowing. But, despite the numerous enviable positions that she has held, and despite the admiration and applause that have accompanied Peggy's brilliant and successful career, she was always bored and restless . . . always seeking some unknown goal, until one day when she sat down and wrote a short story for no other reason than to amuse herself.

This story was accepted and paid for, and Peggy Gaddis felt in her inmost soul that at last she had found the one and only phase of the writing game which she really liked — namely, the fiction field. That was in September, 1922, and since then Peggy has sold six hundred stories, novelettes, and serials, one of which is being brought out in book form this month, and another of which will appear in the spring.

Such a full career might seem to leave little time for anything else. But in addition to all her writing, Peggy Gaddis is married, and is so crazy about keeping house for her husband that she deliberately goes without a maid and cooks and sweeps and mends

with the very same enthusiasm that she writes stories. But this doesn't mean that Peggy Gaddis is a stay-at-home. No, indeed, she just loves traveling, and has visited many corners of the continent with her husband.

"We're always planning to go abroad some time," she says, "but there are still so many fascinating places for us to see in America that we haven't managed our European trip yet."

No wonder Peggy Gaddis understands the American girl so well! And she loves to hear from all American girls in the persons of her readers.

In the next issue Mary Strother Chambers will make her bow.

Please Write to Us!

Every day when the mail-man comes around, we look eagerly for personal correspondence from our readers. The happiest moments of our busy day are those in which we receive letters from friends we have never seen—girls who write what they really think of ALL-STORY magazine.

If you're too busy to write a letter, just fill out this coupon and mail it. *Thank you!*

THE EDITORS,
ALL-STORY MAGAZINE,
280 Broadway, New York City.

Here is my opinion of the stories in this issue:

Love's Branding Iron.....

Her Love at Stake.....

Sage Brush Valentine.....

Afraid to Love .....

A Knight Comes Riding.....

Sweethearts for Sale .....

Queen of Hearts.....

The Boy Next Door.....

When Dreams Come True.....

My favorite authors are .....

Name .....

Address .....

(Name and address may be omitted, if desired)